

200,000 bby

**A Soldiers Tale: Notron In  
Flames**

(Essential Guide To Warfare)

100,000 bby

**Tale Of The Aiwha Pod**

(Republic Commando Game  
Guide)

25,783 bby

**Dawn Of The Jedi: Eruption**

(insider #141)

**Dawn of the Jedi: The  
Adventures of Lanoree Brock,  
Je'daii Ranger**

(kindlepost.com)

**Dawn Of The Jedi: Dark Matters**

(insider #140)

24,500 bby

**Jedi Apprentice Danzigorro**

**Potts recording**

(Essential Guide To The Force)

24,000 bby

**The Watchman's Tale**

(Essential Guide To Warfare  
cutnotes)

25,150 bby - 671 bby

**The History of Xim and the Tion  
Cluster**

The Despotica (Part I)

**The Despotica (Part II: The  
Pirate Prince)**

**The Despotica (Part III: Xim at  
Vontor)**

**The Despotica (Part IV: Evocar)**

**The Gleam Of Kiirium**

(Hyperspace / Essential Guide  
To Warfare cutnotes)

25,000 bby

**Sar Agorn recording**

(Essential Guide To The Force)

7,786 bby

**The Waymancy Storm**

(Essential Guide To Warfare  
cutnotes)

6,900 bby

**Ajunta Pall recording**

(Essential Guide To The Force)

5,000 bby

**Sith Lord Chronicles Part I**

(web 2004)

**Naga Sadow recording**

(Essential Guide To The Force)

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**A Tale From The Dark Side**

(TOTJ sourcebook)

**Tales Of The Jedi Companion  
Vignettes**

(TOTJ sourcebook)

**Master Thon recording**  
(Essential Guide To The Force)  
**Light and shadow**  
(unpublished adventure journal story)

3,999-3,996  
**Sith Lord Chronicles Part II - Part VIII**

3,998 bby  
**Komok-Da recording**  
(Essential Guide To The Force)

3,996 bby  
**Master Tolaris Shim recording**  
(Essential Guide To The Force)

3,980 bby  
**Vima Sunrider Recording**  
(Essential Guide To The Force)

3,964 bby  
**The Secret Journal of Doctor Demagol**  
(hyperspace)  
**The Taris Holofeed: Prime Edition**  
(KOTOR #0)

3,963 bby  
**Labour Pains**  
(hyperspace)

**The Admiral's List: Jimas Veltraa Memorial Edition**  
(KOTOR #13)  
**The Adjudicator Special Report: The Outer Rim**  
(KOTOR #14)  
**The Taris Holofeed: Siege Edition**  
(KOTOR #15)  
**The Admiral's List: Remember Serocco! Edition**  
(KOTOR #16)  
**Adascorp Financial Report: Message from the Chief Executive**  
(KOTOR #17)  
**The Taris Holofeed: Invasion Edition**  
(KOTOR #18)  
**Adascorp: Field Report: Project Black Harvest**  
(KOTOR #19)  
**The Adjudicator Special Report: Tools of the Trade**  
(KOTOR #20)  
**The Taris Holofeed Special Proclamation**  
(KOTOR #21)  
**The Admiral's List: Karath Home Safely**  
(KOTOR #22)  
**Galactic Republic Defense Ministry Daily Brief #KD0092**  
(KOTOR #24)

## **Interference**

(hyperspace)

### **Sith Lord Chronicles Part IX**

3,962 bby

### **Onderon Cutoff**

(wotc scenario)

3,961 bby

### **Sith Lord Chronicles Part X**

3,957 bby

### **Payback**

### **Peril In The Kailion Caves**

### **Czerka 431**

### **Permanent Demotion**

(wotc scenarios)

3.956 bby

### **Sith Lord Chronicles Part XI**

3,953 bby

### **Sith Lord Chronicles Part XII**

3,951 bby

### **Sith Lord Chronicles Part XIII**

Deesra Luur Jada recording: The  
Reformation Of Revan  
(Essential Guide To The Force)

3,660 bby

### **Smuggler's Vanguard**

(web)

### **A Letter from Special Executive Rasmus Blys**

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### **HoloNet News Exclusive**

### **Interview: Baron Deathmark**

### **A Record of the Dread Masters**

### **The Search for Oricon**

### **IMPERIAL EDICT GR-1NC4**

### **EMERGENCY ALERT: Rakghoul**

### **Plague Outbreak on Alderaan**

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### **Arkous**

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(Old Republic blog)

3,653 bby

### **The Third Lesson**

(insider 124)

3,642 bby

### **The Last Battle Of Colonel Jace**

### **Malcom**

(insider 137)

3,031 bby

### **Galactic Battlegrounds: Boss**

### **Gallo Campaign**

(video game summary)

1,032 bby

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(web)

### **Influx**

(hyperspace)

1,010 bby

**Jedi Master Pernicar recording**  
(Essential Guide To The Force)

1,000 bby

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(Essential Guide To The Force)

**Darth Bane Recording**  
(Essential Guide To The Force)

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(gamer #5)

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(Essential Guide To Warfare  
cutnotes)

**Bane of the sith**  
(gamer #3)

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**Boda bass recording**  
(Essential Guide To The Force)

232 bby

Reidi Artom recording  
(Essential Guide To The Force)

215 bby

Mace Windu recording  
(Essential Guide To The Force)

100 bby

**Master Asil Krimisan recording**  
(Essential Guide To The Force)

97 bby

**Free Choice**  
(truce at bakura sourcebook)

67 bby

**The Tenebrous Way**  
(Insider #130)

58 bby

**Between A Rock And A Hard  
Place**  
(Galaxy Guide 7)

53 bby

**Master Lanius Qel-Bertuk  
recording**  
(Essential Guide To The Force)

50 bby

**They're After Our Credits**  
(Essential Guide To Warfare  
cutnotes)

Master Yarael Poof recording

Dooku recording

Master Yoda recording

Master Oppo Rancisis recording

Master Yaddle recording

Master Plo Koon recording  
(Essential Guide To The Force)

42 bby

**Saesee Tiin recording**  
(Essential Guide To The Force)



39bby

**Count Dooku Protest**

(Essential Guide To The Force)

**Darth Maul: Restraint**

(Shadow Hunter 2<sup>nd</sup> ed)

38 bby

**Galactic Battlegrounds:**

**Attichitcuk Campaign**

(video game summary)

36 bby

**The Monster**

(Gamer #5)

**The Syrox Redemption**

(Insider #146)

34 bby

**Darth Maul: Dark Disciple**

(Sideshow Mythos)

**Battle For Mandalore**

(Challenge Magazine #58)

33 bby

**Prelude To Rebellion #0**

(starwars.com)

32 bby

**Darth Maul – Saboteur**

(ebook)

**Obi-Wan**

(video game summary)

**Sarlaac Showdown**

(wotc scenario)

**The Starfighter Trap**

(Hyperspace)

**Starfighter**

(video game summary)

**THE BATTLE OF NABOO**

(Galactic Battlegrounds / Obi-

Wan / Jedi Power Battles /

Battle For Naboo / Battle For

Theed preview)

**Excerpts From See-Threepio's Journal**

(Annual 2007)

**Excerpts From Darth Vader's Diary**

(Annual 2007)

**Darth Maul: End Game**

(The Phantom Menace 2<sup>nd</sup> ed)

**Obi-Wan Recording: Return Of The Sith**

**Saesii Tiin Recording**

**Count Dooku Official Statement**

(Essential Guide To The Force)

**Bounty Hunter**

(video game summary)

**Ki-Adi-mundi Recording**

(Essential Guide To The Force)

**The Life Of Longo Two-Guns**

(Sideshow Mythos)

31 bby

**Deep Spoilers**

(gamer #4)

**Anakin: Apprentice**

(chapter 2)

**Cin Drallig Recording**  
(Essential Guide To The Force)

30 bby  
**Anakin: Apprentice**  
(chapter 3)

29 bby  
**Anakin: Apprentice**  
**(Chapter 4)**  
**Obi-Wan Recording**  
(Essential Guide To The Force)

28 bby  
**Anakin: Apprentice**  
(chapter 5-6)  
**Siri Tachi recording**  
**Master Tholme recording**  
(Essential Guide To The Force)

27 bby  
**Memo From Kamino**  
(Essential Guide To Warfare  
cutnotes)

26 bby  
**Cad Bane: Reputation**  
(Insider #136)  
**Anakin: Apprentice**  
(chapters 7-8)

24 bby  
**A Traveller's Journals Of Ralltiir**  
(WOTC)

## A SOLDIER'S STORY: NOTRON IN FLAMES

The ancient history of Coruscant was shaped by war between the Battalions of Zhell—believed by some to be the ancestral human population—and the Taungs. During one skirmish, a volcanic eruption destroyed the city of Zhell. Taking this as a sign of divine favor, the Taungs christened themselves *Dha Werda Verda*, the Shadow Warriors, and celebrated their victory in the epic poem of the same name.

*Dha Werda Verda* encompasses more than seven hundred verses divided into eleven chapters. The best-known part is a fraction of the ninth chapter, presented here as translated by Baobab archivists:

*And so upon his pyre burned the Doom of Ulmarah, and the warrior bands stood as ragged bandits, in zigzag lines of mourning. With the dawn the flat-faced Zhell would come, cackling and howling, oozing mirth and tricks, and find the shade of the Doom departed and the Taungs unprotected.*

*And so with the dawn would our woe be revealed. Our once-bright armaments would become stacked grave goods, trophies for Zhell children. Our flesh would become smoke given to uncaring gods, and the sky would forget our names.*

*With death upon him Rexutu the Unconquerable prepared to be stripped of all by his enemy, but vowed that his honor would be last to be torn away. And so the Unconquerable gathered his kinsmen and his oath girdlings alike. They polished their fearsome helms, that they might flash even in the weak sun of Notron. They rewrapped the hilts of their weapons and pounded straight the shafts, that they might slake their thirst in Zhell ichor a final time.*

*Assembled they ascended, in taut Taung lines, to the high place where the Reaver had staked his standard before it was cast down into the mire. They gazed out over the gathering places and walking ways of Great Zhell where they scaled peak and cradled valley, the lines of lights ordering the night. They unfurled the Taung banner, reversed, a reckless thing snapping in the dark, awaiting Zhell eyes. And they performed ceremonies of leave-taking, for now they had died to the world and must be remade among the stars.*

*When the dawn came the Zhell awakened and saw the Taungs upon the high place and were afraid, for the morning light caught the glint of helms and weapons and created phantom warriors, made of dazzle and distance. But the cleverest of them were not deceived, and saw how few we were. And so they assembled without haste, merry in mockery, and prepared to march. And in the high place we awaited death.*

*But then came a shaking of the ground, and the sun's wan light was eclipsed by a bright and terrible fire that exploded from the rock. The patterns of Great Zhell shivered and broke. And after this came darkness, as the very air turned to black ash. The Zhell fell on their faces in terror, and from the high place we ran in haste to meet them, and we were cloaked in shadow.*

*The Maker had come to unmake, and the Taungs would be His instruments.*

**100,000 bby**

**THE TALE OF THE AIWHA POD**

*Republic Commando Game Guide (2005)*

Before the dawn of the second sun, there dwelt beneath the oceans a magical god-beast. He was called Protas, for he was the first and only of his kind: a god, and a beast, and the ruler of all animals beneath the surface. Protas was strong: stronger than any living beast, and mystical. He had powers beyond comprehension.

But as it is in the waters, there were many who sought to take his place, to claim the title and honors of being the most powerful beast of the open seas.

First came Melkorr, son of the deep waters, a dark titan, with sharp hunter's teeth, and fins like volcanic mountains. He challenged Protas openly: "Protas, meet me in battle, and we shall decide who is the ruler of this blue kingdom." Protas met Melkorr upon the ridge of Thalina, and there they fought. For six nights and six days, they roiled the seas — brawled and grappled, wrestled and dueled, Melkorr, with his power and size, sought to overwhelm Protas. But Protas was quick and agile, and he turned Melkorr's power back upon the deep-sea creature. On the seventh day, Melkorr tired, and in his exhaustion, faltered. Protas felled him. The seas churned with his blood and the fish were fed for an eon on his carcass.

Protas continued to rule the oceans. He was next challenged by a sentient group of kikla swimmers. The kikla were tiny, but they were legion, and they challenged him: "Protas, meet us in battle. Through our sheer numbers, we will overcome you."

Protas met the vast swarm of kikla in the deepest waters of the Ancient Trench, and there they fought. For a month, they swarmed and struggled, swam and battled. The kikla, with their vast numbers, sought to outlast Protas. But Protas was strong and single-minded, and he scattered the school and slowly ate them, thus maintaining strength through the long battle. The kikla were quarrelsome and inconsistent, and when they struck, their tiny teeth gave little wound. Finally, at the new moon, Protas gobbled the last of the tiny kikla and they were no more.

Now, by this time, Protas had grown old and arrogant in his power. He knew that none could oppose him, and he wielded his authority freely. One day, he met an aiwha pod, who were swimming to the south seas for winter. Protas blocked their way. "You cannot pass. Go back to the north seas and freeze." The aiwha were puzzled. "Why, Master Protas?" they asked. The old gad laughed: "Because it pleases me."

The aiwha knew they could not return, that they would surely die in the north seas. We must fight, they told themselves. And so they did. But being aiwha, and not desirous of glory and fame, they did not announce their challenge to Protas in the manner of the old ways. Instead, they simply and swiftly, attacked.

First, like the kikla, they swarmed him. And Protas scattered them. And then, like Melkorr, they used their jaws to rip at his flesh. But Protas' hide was tough, and they could not strike a killing blow.

But then the aiwha returned, swarming like the kikla and attaching like Melkorr. They were fierce, but not large. they were numerous, but single-minded. Thus The aiwha, after a time, began to bleed Protas. But they could not bring him down.

One of the aiwha saw that the god-beast had exposed his soft throat, and sacrificing himself, charged and clamped down hard with his jaws. Protas bellowed in agony, feeling the life-force ebb away from him, and smashEd at the lone aiwha's body with his fins. But even in death, the brave aiwha hung on, never letting go, to allow his friends to strike at Protas a final time.

And thus, did a pod of aiwha end an elder gad's life.

And that is why, to this day, the aiwha rule the oceans and are accorded a measure of respect even among the largest, most powerful, and most plentiful beasts. For the aiwha, desiring no glory, defeated the monster-god Protas and brought peace to the oceans of Kamino.

**25,783 bby**

### **Dawn of the Jedi : Eruption**

Hawk Ryo drifted in and out the shadows, a shadow himself. The moon world Zerist was located far from the sun, and most of the available light was reflected off the gas giant, Obri, around which the moon orbited. Kainnan was typically bustling with activity, but the workers' town was now deserted. Like all the surface towns on Zerist, Kainnan was located near an active volcano for its much needed warmth, despite the risk of occasional eruptions. The authorities usually predicted the eruptions in time and evacuated the threatened areas, just as they had recently done with Kainnan. No one was left in the town except Hawk.

In theory.

In reality, the Je'daii Ranger spotted two figures atop the flat-roofed building less than a kilometer away. Only five stories high, it was still the tallest building in the area. They were Twi'leks, like himself. And armed. Hawk opened his comm and called his partner.

\* \* \*

Her surroundings, Lanoree Brock decided, were beautiful.

Underground seas flowed through large caverns smoothed with high vaulted ceilings, and natural minerals gave off enough light to create a twilight effect. It was no wonder the rich of Zerist chose to live in the warm caverns rather than the cold surface of the moon. It was calm on this island, lending itself to meditation.

Peaceful.

The negotiations were not. The management of Dessain Mining and the manual laborers were now simply shouting at one another; ill will was building. Lanoree was finding it difficult to maintain balance between the light and the dark sides of the Force as she was taught.

Management consisted entirely of the extended Dessain family, which was headed by Eomin Dessain, the tall, pale, patrician head of the clan. The workers,

both human and alien, were led by short, weather-beaten Arko Santis, and demanded a voice in how the company was run. They left Zerist to labor at the gas mining operations floating above Obri. The pay was steady, if not generous, but it was a hard life.

For their part, the Dessains were loath to cede control to anyone who was not family. The solution, it was decided, would be a marriage between Brom Santis, Arko's oldest son, and Oma Dessain, Eomin's youngest daughter. Brom would become part of the Dessain family and a voice for the workers. Lanoree had gotten stuck with the role of negotiator, and though it wasn't the solution she would have suggested, if it satisfied all parties concerned, then it satisfied her.

That was before Oma Dessain vanished.

Each side blamed the other for her disappearance. Work at Dessain Mining had ground to a halt. Tempers flared and open class warfare looked not only possible, but likely. Lanoree and Hawk had been sent by the Je'daii Council on Tython to prevent violence and find the girl.

Lanoree's comm buzzed. The Ranger swung her long legs out of the chair, turning away from all the shouting. "Please tell me you found the girl."

"I may have found her," Hawk replied. "I went to the spaceport to check who arrived or left around the time of the kidnapping. I discovered a Shikaakwan ship registered to Baron Volnos Ryo."

"Your brother."

"My brother the crime lord." Lanoree could picture Hawk's lips twisting in distaste. "He owns interests in the mining operations on Obri's two other moons, but he's never been able to get a foothold with the Dessains. One of the ways to increase the value of his own holdings is to decrease the value of his rival's holdings. Are you growling?"

"Maybe. Will Oma still be alive?"

"Her body hasn't been found, so it's likely. If they intend to kill her, it'll be when the two sides are at each others' throats."

"Which will be soon."

“You have to keep them from reaching the boiling point. I think I’ve spotted where Oma is being held, but you can’t say anything until I know for sure. I’ll let you know what I find. Keep the workers and management from killing each other.”

“Right. You get the easy job.”

“The Force be with you.”

Lanoree turned back to the round wooden table and narrowed her gray eyes. Both sides were already at the breaking point. Violence was ready to erupt. But Lanoree had a theory: Sometimes the best way to cut off violence was to use it first.

Her right hand dropped to the slugthrower at her hip. She didn’t often carry one — didn’t need it most times — but something told her to wear one today. If there’s one thing Lanoree learned through her experience, it was to listen to her instincts.

With one fluid move, she aimed the slugthrower straight up over her head, and fired three bursts into the ceiling. The arguing stopped dead and all eyes went to the auburn-haired Ranger. Je’daii were mysterious beings to most of the sentients of the Settled Worlds. They went where they willed and intervened where they chose or, they claimed, as the Force directed. They had strange powers and were both respected and feared. Right now, Lanoree was feared.

Good. That meant she had their attention.

The slugthrower still in her hand, the Je’daii Ranger sat back in her chair, placing the weapon on the table before her, the barrel pointed at the now silent delegation. She spoke quietly. “The last time I was a negotiator was on Ska Gora. Before I was done, forests were ablaze and one of the parties was dead.”

She leaned forward. “I was hoping these negotiations would go smoother.”

In truth, the deaths and the burning forests on Ska Gora haunted Lanoree. The negotiators here on Zerist, however, didn’t need to know that.



“Perhaps we should begin again,” she suggested in a low murmur. They did, quietly, and with nervous glances in her direction.

\* \* \*

Certain he hadn’t been seen by anyone, Hawk reached the side of the five-story building and glanced upwards. One guard was directly above him and the other would be across the roof. It was vital that he silence both before they could give alarm — assuming the girl was alive.

The Ranger brought his sword out of its sheath without a whisper, holding it in his right hand as he let the balance within him slip into the dark side. Hawk knew the dark side well; he dwelled too deeply in it once and it got him sent to Bogan, a moon of Tython where those who drifted too far to the dark side were sent by the Je’daii Council for solitary reflection and meditation until they returned to the balance. Right now he needed to use aggression, however, which meant channeling the dark side. He eased into it with a comfortable familiarity while he crouched and then Leaped straight upward, letting the Force carry him. Hawk cleared the edge of the roof, right in front of the very surprised Twi’lek guard, and without hesitation slashed his sword across the guard’s neck. He died silently.

The other guard sensed something amiss and started to turn. Hawk gestured with the Force and pulled him across the roof. The guard gasped for a moment before being impaled on the Ranger’s sword. Their eyes met and Hawk recognized him. Deon Aarl原因 — one of his brother’s personal guards. Aarl原因’s eyes registered recognition as well, and then life faded from them. Hawk felt his death in the Force and part of him, the part that fed on the dark side, felt a deep satisfaction.

The Ranger let the body slide off his sword and took a deep breath, centering himself again in the balance. It was tempting for Hawk to just stay in the dark side as had once before. It was seductive but dangerous.

Hawk found a stairway in the middle of the roof leading down into the building and descended cautiously. Two floors down were two large rooms on either side of the stairwell, the doors left wide open in the haste of the evacuation. At first blush, they appeared to have been used as dormitories for workers that were unmarried; cots were overthrown and debris littered the floor.

Hugging the stairway wall. Hawk glanced through the doorway and found Oma. The girl was bound and gagged on a cot next to the wall opposite the door. A large and surly looking Twi'lek stood guard, a slug thrower at the ready, but he was looking at the far end of the room.

Focusing his senses through the Force, the Je'daii heard two more Twi'leks at the other end of the dormitory. Neither sounded happy.

"...thought this would be over by now!"

"You got other things to do?"

"Other than sit next to a sokar volcano? Yes!"

"The problem is that Je'daii sitting at the table. Not for long, though. Our contact will take care of her. Then we off the girl, leave the corpse where it can be found, and get gone."

Hawk couldn't risk comming a warning to Lanoree. His best bet was to settle things here and hope his fellow Ranger was still alive. However, the moment he made a move, the two guards at the end of the room would see him and the guard closest to Oma would certainly kill her. He needed a diversion.

The volcano provided a spectacular one. Ahead of schedule, the eruption started with a clap of thunder as plumes of pumice, flaming ash, and molten lava were belched into the air. Everyone was stunned for a moment, but then Hawk Ryo moved. His sword in his right hand and a long knife in his left, he swept into the room. Hurling the knife towards the guard standing next to Oma, he guided it with the Force into the Twi'lek's neck. The guard's finger tightened on the trigger of his slug thrower as he dropped; the shot went wild but was audible even over the roaring volcano.

Hawk pivoted towards the two other guards and sped towards them as they turned to the source of the slug fire and spotted him. A moment for their reaction. A few steps for Hawk.

A moment as they brought their slug throwers around. Another few steps. They aimed their weapons. Hawk threw himself into a forward roll beneath their shots and pushed off of one leg as he came forward and up. Flipping in mid-air over the guards, the Je'daii shoved his boot down hard into the upturned face of the

one to his right. Nose bone and cartilage cracked as the Twi'lek fell backwards. The Je'daii landed, spun, and thrust his sword into the fallen Twi'lek's chest — a quick and clean kill. His partner kept firing, but always where the Je'daii had been. Hawk landed in a crouch and, with a gesture of his hand, delivered a Force blow that sent his target backwards through the window. The Twi'lek's scream was covered by the volcano's roar.

Hawk preferred not to kill when he had the option, but there was no time and no other choice. Still, the dark part in him exulted and he struggled to bring himself back to the balance.

Hawk squatted next to Oma. "I'm Je'daii ranger Hawk Ryo and I've been sent here to rescue you. Try to be calm." Picking the teen up, Hawk threw her over one shoulder and raced back up to the roof. Superheated volcanic debris rained down on the town, the wooden buildings starting to catch fire. Hawk again tried to warn Lanoree, but the ash jammed the comm's signal.

It was hard to see through the ash and the Ranger tightened his grip on Oma. Calling on the Force once more, he leaped to the next nearest roof, ran across, and then jumped to the next roof after that. He could barely breathe and was jumping blind, but he hoped he could trust in the Force that he was taking them out of danger.

And that Lanoree was not dead.

\* \* \*

Ranger Brock eased back into her chair. The discussions were still going nowhere but at least everyone was civil. A servant brought her a goblet of wine, a Vaisamond red, something she had developed a taste for on Ska Gora. Lanoree raised the goblet to her lips — and paused. She knew the bouquet of the wine and something bitter underlay the aroma.

Lanoree turned her head to glance at the servant who had given it to her: a nervous little man, as old as Eomin Dessain. Fear came off him like a wave, a bitter aroma of its own. The servant turned to run. Lanoree caught him with the Force, lifted him up, and dropped him onto the round table. Thrusting the goblet in his face, Lanoree whispered, "I think this vintage is off. Please. Taste it."

The man's eyes went wide as he babbled incoherently. Lanoree growled, "Drink it, little man, or I will make you drink it." She didn't have that ability, but it was

commonly believed that the mysterious Je'daii could seize your mind. That fear, that superstition, sometimes served the Je'daii almost as well as the Force did.

The servant certainly believed the stories. "No! It's poisoned!" he blurted.

Lanoree folded her arms, keeping her eyes on her would-be assassin. "Master Dessain, you have a traitor in your midst. The kidnappers would have needed someone on the inside to reach your daughter. That traitor is this man."

Eomin Dessain looked at his servant, appalled. "Betolo? All these years, you have been a trusted servant, almost a member of the family... why?"

"Because all these years I have only been a servant." Betolo said quietly. "Never a member of the family. I wanted to have something of my own before I died. A chance to leave this wretched rock."

Dessain's voice seethed with fury. "Where is my daughter?"

"With any luck... dead. My lord."

Lanoree's comm buzzed. "With any luck, my lord, she is not," she said as she activated the comm. "Hawk?"

"Lanoree, someone is going—!"

"Yes, I know. He tried and failed. Is Oma Dessain with you?"

"She is," Ryo said, "but we have another problem."

\* \* \*

"What do you mean you refuse to marry Brom Santis?!" Eomin, while relieved to have his daughter back, was furious.

Oma Dessain stood alongside Hawk Ryo with the delegations on the island in the cavern. She, like him, was covered with ash, making her pale skin even whiter and powdering her dark hair the same hue. Free from her bonds, she stood glaring defiantly at her father.

Oma's chin jutted out. "I mean I won't marry him! No one asked me if I wanted to get married! I don't and I won't!"

"You have your duty to the family!"

"I have a duty to myself! I don't know this Brom, I don't love him, and I won't marry him to settle some dispute!"

This set off another round of arguing between father and daughter with Santis pitching in.

"This is breaking down quickly," Hawk murmured.

"Actually, my sympathies are with the girl. She shouldn't be a clause in a treaty," Lanoree murmured back.

"If she doesn't relent, the negotiations will likely collapse and everything we've done will be for nothing."

"I think I may have another solution," Lanoree said. "First, I'll need their attention." She shot her slugthrower three times into the air. And again, with the same effect.

Very pleasantly, Lanoree spoke. "In other parts of the solar system, rival interests have a practice called fostering. I suggest you try it. Oma would become a foster child in the Santis household and Brom would be the same with the Dessains. Each would be treated as a full member of the family they are with. They would spend six months with one family and six months with the other. The workers would have a voice through Brom and Oma would learn firsthand about the workers' lives."

"I think this is a very reasonable suggestion," Hawk added, equally pleasant.

But the expressions on the two Je'daii firmly suggested that all sides accept the deal. Oma looked pleased; at least she wasn't getting married.

\* \* \*

Details were worked out, Hawk cleaned up, and the two Je'daii met at the spaceport to take leave of Zerist and of each other.

"The Council has summoned me back to Tython for a special mission," Lanoree said. "It's been four years since I've been back; it's time."

"I'm heading out to Furies Gate," replied Hawk. It was the outermost planet in the system. Great Generation ships left from the small world, seeking a path through the maze that was the

Core and looking for ways back to the rest of the galaxy. The Settled Worlds jointly maintained a station there. "I like to look out into the stars and meditate," he said.

A small shadow passed over Lanoree's face. "My brother used to look out at the stars and wonder if there was a way back to the rest of the galaxy. He was never very happy on Tython," she said softly. She was quiet for a moment, then shook it off and said, "It was good working with you, Ranger Ryo. I look forward to the chance to do it again."

Hawk nodded. "I do, too, Ranger Brock. The Force be with you."

Lanoree smiled. "And you," she replied. The Je'daii then crossed to their waiting ships and took off into the star flecked skies.

### **Dawn of the Jedi : The Adventures of Lanoree Brock, Je'daii Ranger**

*kindlepost.com (2013)*

Ironholgs, enter this in my journal, there's a good droid. Okay. Where to begin...

So, the Je'daii Council asked me back to Tython, which meant only one thing — they had a mission for me. I'm a Ranger, it's to be expected, although the last time they did this I ended up flying out to Ska Gora and getting involved in the Wookie land wars. I thought that was going to be a breeze. It ended ... messily.

But this is different. So very different. The way I see it, there are two reasons they called me back. The first is that the mission is so serious, so delicate, and potentially so deadly that they couldn't risk any form of communication to fill me

in. They couldn't transmit the information, even on the Je'daii's own secured channels. They couldn't send anyone — a droid, a Ranger — with encrypted files. This had to be face to face.

And when I met them in the valley, even that meeting was done in extreme secrecy. Strange to see the Council like that. Almost as if they were scared.

The second reason they chose me is just how personal this mission is to me.

At first, I thought the latter might compromise the former. But I've had time to let it sink in. I've had time to dwell on the past — those early years on Tython with my dear brother Dal, and the later years without him — and I can see why the Je'daii Council are so wise.

The danger of the mission and its personal aspect are so intertwined that they couldn't choose anyone else. It's me. It always had to be me.

They say a Je'daii's training is what makes them the person they are, and in some respects that's true.

My journey across Tython shaped me. I found my true calling at Anil Kesh, the Je'daii Temple of Science.

There I learned to temper my doubts and channel my talents. There I first discovered the alchemy of flesh.

But it was I who made that long, ultimately tragic journey that really formed the person I am now.

So now I'm embarking on my new mission. First stop will be Kalimahr. I've been told to meet a Twi'lek called Tre Sana there. I'm told he will help me. And already I'm unsettled. I'm used to dealing with non-Tythans, but for something as sensitive as this? Why is there something a Twi'lek can tell me that the Council cannot?

Not the best way to start a mission, eh, Ironholgs? In mystery. In darkness.

Nevertheless, I returned to Tython with peace of mind, and now I'm leaving again with a great weight bearing down on me. A personal pressure the likes of

which I never thought I'd have to face. And such a danger for the whole Tythan system.

I feel that I'm about to test every moment of training I've ever undertaken.

But that's fine, Ironholgs. I'll have you with me, grumpy droid that you are. I have my Peacemaker ship, refined and customized to my liking. Faster engine. Bigger guns.

And I have the Force. Whatever happens, whatever I'm about to face — and whoever I might meet— the Force is always there.

Set course for Kalimahr. And may the Force go with me.

Je'daii Ranger Lanoree Brock, signing off.

### **Dawn of the Jedi : Into the Void - Dark Matters**

*Insider #140 (2013)*

Even at the beginning of our journey I feel like a rock in the river of the Force. Lanoree is a fish carried by that river, feeding from it, living within it and relying upon the waters for her well-being. But I am unmoving. An inconvenience to the water as long as I remain. And slowly, slowly, I am being eroded to nothing.-  
Dalien Brock, diaries. 10,661 TYA

She is a little girl, the sky seems wide and endless, and Lanoree Brock breathes in the wonders of Tython as she runs to find her brother.

Dalien is down by the estuary again. He likes being alone, away from all the other children at Bodhi, the Je'daii Temple of the Arts. Lanoree's parents have sent her to find him, and though they still have some teaching to do that afternoon, they've promised that they will walk up to the boundary of the Edge Forest that evening.

Lanoree loves it up there. And it scares her a little, as well. Close to the Temple, close to the sea, she can feel the Force ebbing and flowing through everything- the air she breathes, the sights she sees, and all that makes up the beautiful



scenery. Up at the Edge Forest, there's a primal wildness to the Force that sets her blood pumping.

Her mother will smile and tell her that she will learn about it all, given time. Her father will look silently into the forest, as if he yearns to explore that way.

And her little brother, only nine years old, will start to cry.

Always, at the Edge Forest, he cries. "Dal!" She swishes through the long grasses close to the riverbank, hands held out by her sides so that the grass caresses her palms. She won't tell him about the walk planned for that evening. If she does he'll get moody, and he might not agree to come home with her.

He can be like that sometimes, and their father says it's the sign of someone finding his own way.

Dal doesn't seem to have heard her, and as she closes on him she slows from a run to a walk and thinks, If that was me I'd have sensed me approaching ages ago. Dal's head remains dipped. The river flows by, fast and full from the recent rains. There's a power to it that is intimidating, and closing her eyes, Lanoree feels the Force and senses the myriad life-forms that call the river home. Some are as small as her finger, others that swim upriver from the ocean are almost half the size of a Cloud Chaser ship. She knows from her teachings that many of them have teeth.

Perhaps her brother is asleep. She bites her lip, hesitant. Then she probes out with her mind and- "I told you to never do that to me!"

"Dal..." He stands and turns around, and he looks furious. Just for a moment there's a fire in his eyes that she doesn't like. She has seen those flames before, and carries the knotted scar tissue in her lower lip to prove it. Then his anger slips and he smiles. "Sorry. You startled me, that's all."

"You're drawing?" she asks.

Dal closes the art pad. "It's rubbish."

"I don't believe that," Lanoree said. "You're really good. Temple Master Fenn himself says so."

"Temple Master Fenn is a friend of father's." Lanoree ignores the insinuation and walks closer to her brother. She can already see that he has chosen a fine place from which to draw the surroundings. The river curves here, and a smaller tributary joins from the hills of the Edge Forest, causing a confusion of currents. The under-growth on the far bank is colorful and vibrant, and there's a huge old oak tree whose hollowed trunk is home to a flight of weavebirds. Their spun golden threads glisten in the afternoon sun. The birdsong compliments the river's roar.

"Let me see," Lanoree says. Dal does not look at her, but he opens the pad. "It's beautiful," she says. "The Force has guided your fingers, Dal."

But she's not sure. Dal picks a heavy pencil from his pocket and strikes five thick lines through his drawing, left to right, tearing the paper and ruining it forever. His expression does not change as he breathing. It's almost as if there is no anger at all.

"There," he says. "That's better." For a moment, the lines look like claw marks, and as Lanoree takes a breath and blinks-

A soft, insistent alarm pulled her up from sleep. Lanoree sighed and sat up, rubbing her eyes, massaging the dream away. Dear Dal. She dreamed of him often, but they were usually dreams of those later times when everything was turning bad. Not when they were still children for whom Tython was so full of potential.

Perhaps it was because she was on her way home.

**c. 24,500 B.B.Y.**

Author: Jedi apprentice Danzigorro Potts

*I have received the transmission, the news that General Xendor is dead. At last, we have prevailed over the Legions of Lettow. I know it may be wrong of me, but I am relieved by his death, as I trust it brings an end to this awful war. For the first time in months, I look forward to tomorrow.*

*I wonder . . . I wonder if I might find a spot of sunshine before morning. Better yet, I might find a familiar, friendly face . . . one that's still breathing.*

*Forgive me, my Masters. My thoughts go astray. I do not mean to dishonor your teachings by babbling. You know I was never good with words. I always wished I could make them flow better. My throat is so dry.*

*And I'm bleeding something awful.*

*I hope I'm holding this audiocard right.*

*[Static.]*

*Hear my words, fellow Jedi. I, the Jedi apprentice Danzigorro Potts, am the last survivor of the conflict on Columus. There were nearly thirty Dark Jedi, so we were fairly evenly matched. Tried to trap us in this ravine, they did. The battle was fierce and fast. It's so quiet now, peaceful even, but we can thank the Force for all we . . .*

*We can thank the Force for . . .*

*So sorry. I want to leave you with some important words. I guess I'm at a loss.*

*[Static.]*

*I'm dying. I'm just going to say whatever I want to say.*

*I killed my friend Blendri and her apprentice Cuthallox today, right here on the battlefield. Hadn't seen them since they ran off with my old Master, Jook-jook H'broozin, to join up with Xendor. Caught up with H'broozin on Corulag and ran him through, I did, but Blendri and Cuthallox kept getting away, one world to the next. All the way to here. Not that I wanted revenge, of course, but . . . well, all the rebels had to be stopped, did they not?*

*I loved being a Jedi. Loved it. Wouldn't have changed a thing. But to be honest, after Blendri joined up with the Legions of Lettow, I started thinking. About how long she'd been complaining about the Jedi Order being so sterile. About how bored she was by all that endless meditation.*

*Understand . . . I was never tempted by the dark side. Being in the light was never a dangerous balancing act for me, it wasn't. Maybe it's because I'm simpler than some, or so Blendri says. I mean, that's what she used to say. But I never ducked a battle, and I never betrayed the Jedi, and I never wanted to do bad things.*

*To the Jedi who finds this data card, I'm hoping you'll remember this about Blendri. You see, Blendri was my best friend when we were children. She was the one who showed me how to use the Force, even before we knew what the Force was. She was a good girl, Blendri was. A really good person. Maybe she teased me a few times when she became a Jedi Knight and I was still an apprentice, but I knew she was just joking. The reason I mention this is because I don't think she joined the dark side and the Legions of Lettow because she was evil. I think she just got tired of all the Jedi rules, being told what to do, how to behave, how not to behave, all the time. I think it crushed her a bit.*

*As for all the other Jedi who left the Order to join the legions . . . I don't know. It seems too easy to blame everything on Xendor and the dark side. Maybe we . . . maybe the Jedi were partly to blame, too. I'm not good with history, but I know that for more than five centuries the Jedi didn't have much trouble with anyone. Sure, a dark Jedi here and there, I heard tell. But then along came Xendor, telling Jedi they didn't have to obey orders all the time.*

*I know it sounds crazy, but I wonder . . . maybe the Jedi need an enemy. I think . . . without a common enemy, we . . . we'll just wind up fighting each other . . . and ourselves. Does that make sense?*

*It's getting really cold. I only wish—*

*[End of recording.]*

**24,000 bby**

### **The Watchman's Tale**

*Until its destruction in 19 BBY, the Caamasi Palace of Memnii was renowned among historians for its millions of first-person accounts by beings who had confronted violence during their lives. Among the oldest records preserved in the Palace was a Baragwin sense lattice imprinted by an anonymous Republic soldier assigned to Falang Minor shortly after the end of the Tionese War (circa 24,000 BBY). The lattice's visual record is irretrievable due to the loss of the original algorithm used to encode it, but the audio remains audible. The following translation is derived from a copy in the possession of a traveling memnii exhibit at the time of Caamas's devastation.*

I grew up on Little Atullus, but my parents brought me to Okator VIII when I was a boy. They sunk their life savings into land promised by some hotshot traders out of Brentaal. There was a lot of that on Little Atullus then – talk that a better life awaited you on the unspoiled worlds beyond the Rim.

And it was kind of true. Okator VIII wasn't lush — it was chilly and the soil was poor. But land was cheap, the soil could be improved with effort, and the native whellays were gentle beasts that took easily to domestication. That was my first job, while my parents built the cabin and cleared the fields: go into the woods and put out whellay bait. I caught six the first day and thought I was the god of the forest. Then I named them all. My parents hadn't told me that whellays were destined for the dinner table. There'd been so much to do, I guess it hadn't occurred to them.

I was lonely at first, but eventually I forgot about Little Atullus, except in dreams. And I got used to farm life. Let the whellays out at dawn with a shakwulf to tend them, weed the saria, wait until the charsby pitchers sensed the midmorning sun and then stick siphons in them, always approaching from the shadow side so you wouldn't get a quill in the hand. Harvest the nectar, then spend the rest of the morning loam-tapping for ripe galt-gourds. After lunch I'd whistle the shakwulf to bring the whellays home. Then I'd spend the afternoon currying their coats and checking their hooves, see if any were coming into estrus and consult the lineage-books for the best pairings. Unless it was shearing season, in which case we'd be in the barn into the night. Then dinner, repairs and lessons if I couldn't get out of them. At first I only tolerated it. Then I realized I was happy.

That I knew each of our whellays by the smell of his coat and the way he'd whicker. That I'd known Brun, my favorite shakwulf, from his first moment as a blind pink pup, and he loved me more than anything in the galaxy. I knew every tree in our woods, every outcropping in the hills, every dip and ridge we hadn't leveled out in the charsby orchards.

We knew about the war, of course. We'd hear the latest when we went into town or got a good signal on the subspace vox. I knew about the Tionese, that they'd done awful things to us and maybe we'd done awful things to them. I'd heard of Xim. He'd been eaten by the devil-slugs so they could gain his powers, but the Tionese claimed he would return from death to lead them.

But he'd been dead forever with no signs of coming back, and all of it was such a long way from Okator that I didn't see how it mattered to us. We weren't even on the Perlemian; sometimes the beacon at Uthtara would break down and you wouldn't see a tradeship for weeks until it got fixed.

I heard that's why they chose us. I heard they were tired of killing a few blocks worth of people on some city-world so big that the deaths were just a statistic. I heard they looked for a place where they could kill everybody. I don't know how they picked Okator VIII. It doesn't really matter, I suppose. It could have been a lot of places in the Divide. They could have picked Matabre, or Ilamna or Cortilium Major. But they didn't. They picked Okator.

I was out in the forests with Brun tracking a lost whellay when I heard the first ship. I knew it wasn't one of the tradeships or a courier on business from Hleua. The drive sounded different — it had this weird, deep grumble to it. I didn't see that one, but I saw the next one, and the third. They were copper-colored, with red sigils on the conning towers, and I knew they were Tionjacks.

The next thing I knew I was on my back and I couldn't hear. I got up and saw the trees on the Pinson ridge had been flattened, pointing away from Derway Township. There was a pillar of black smoke beyond the ridge, and then the smoke washed over the ridgeline and hid everything. Brun was racing around me, and I could see him showing his teeth and howling, even though I could barely hear it.

Then Brun stopped and the spines on his back raised up. He stood stock still for a moment and then went streaking off through the trees, toward home. And I saw the glint of the Tionese ships above Duny Gap and Shillagh Hollow. Moving slowly, like they were looking for something.

I saw the flashes of the incendiaries and the dioxis flares, beneath the jacks' bright bellies. I saw the gas billow up above Duny and knew that everybody there was dead. Then the flames came shooting up from Shillagh. And then I started to run, because now there was another glint above the ridge, above our valley.

The worst thing, I think, is that I saw the farm before the jack began its attack run. Brun had rounded up the whellays and brought them home. He'd been taught that danger was out in the woods, from nightscowls and things like that, and the farm meant safety. He didn't know that now the opposite was true.

The jack ignited its plasma torch, and I saw Brun and the whellays running in circles. They were on fire. All I wanted was for them to be still, for it to be over. It took so long. And then the house was burning, and the fields. I saw each of the pitchers pop as its nectar boiled. And then the jacks were gone, their work done. It was three weeks before the courier came and found Derway destroyed by the pressure bomb. Another two before I was able to hail a scoutship. That was the last time I saw Okator.

As far as I know it was the last time anyone saw Okator.

They wanted me to go to Coruscant, to tell my story. But I refused. Instead I went to Abhean to enlist, and eventually they let me. Four months later, before I could get into the fight, Desevro surrendered. The war was over.

And now I've been here for 12 years. A Republic Guardsman, serving the Jedi watchmen. I monitor ship traffic, intelligence, transmissions — everything that comes out of the Tion.

I don't like Falang Minor. It's cold and it rains all the time. There isn't anything that will grow or any beasts to tend. And I don't like what I do. It gives me too much time to think.

But somebody has to do it, and I'm that somebody. I didn't choose it — it was chosen for me, when the jacks came to Okator. I don't hate the Tionese anymore. I used to. It made me feel sick all the time, so I made myself stop. But I don't trust them. No one in the Republic should ever trust them. They need to be watched, and my job is to watch them. All of us here on Falang watch them. And we always will.

**25,150 bby - 671 bby**

## **The History of Xim and the Tion Cluster**

### **Introduction**

The tales of Xim the Despot reach back so far in galactic memory that the lines between ancient chronicles and long-held myths have become too blurred to ever redraw. And as he has receded in history, Xim has come to mean quite different things to different species. To much of galactic society he is a savage figure but also a mythic one, the impact of his atrocities dulled by the passage of eons. To the Tionese, he is a melancholy symbol of vanished might and betrayal. To the Hutts, he is an example of humans' brutish power and Hutt vengeance. To those whose ancestors were his slaves, he is a story to spook children, but one hinting at a terrible truth: Space is full of horrors that could ruin everything one considers eternal and holds dear.

Recent decades have seen a renaissance in Xim scholarship. The New Republic has granted unprecedented access to Imperial archives, allowing the restoration of material thought erased in data purges. The reborn Jedi Council has shared historical records recovered from its secret storehouses. Species such as the Columi have released invaluable chronicles dating back eons. The end of the Empire and the diminution of Hutt power have allowed exploration of worlds long unreachable. And progressive entities within the Tion itself have cooperated with historical inquiries, hoping to shake off the ancient resentments and conspiracy theories that have kept their region a backwater.

This is not to say that the history of the Despot is now clear: Xim remains a divisive figure among historians, with respected scholars continuing to argue about the chronology of his rule, which deeds should properly be attributed to his father Xer, and whether or not the many tales of *The Despotica*, that epic work of drama, have a basis in historical reality. But whether one champions the theories of Bleys Harand, Sal Ransen, S.V. Skynx or other Xim scholars, this much is clear: Many of Xim's accomplishments are as awe-inspiring as the wildest tales of *The Despotica*. Xim's monstrous ambitions may have claimed much of what he built, but his name will endure as long as galactic civilization itself.

## **Before Xim: The Pirate-King of Argai**

Most every child knows that Xim the Despot was the child of Xer VIII -- "Son of Xer!" remains a common expression of amazement in parts of the Outer Rim. But what Xer did to build the Tion into an empire has been largely obscured by his son's deeds.

Today the planet Argai is much as it was in Xer's time: a chilly rock with little to see except scattered ruins and the blaze of the Ihala Spiral (now known as the Indrexu) in its night skies. The Argaians have been renowned (and cursed) since the first days of the Tion as hard-bitten traders and daring pilots with a habit of turning to piracy when it suits them. Xer -- generally said to have been born around 25,200 BBY -- was a pirate chieftain whose fleets explored the Ihala's churning gases and dust clouds, carving out boltholes and secret routes. From these hiding places, they harried shipping in the backwater regions of the Kingdom of Cron and raided worlds as far from home as Rudrig and Caluula. In this age before reliable navicomputers, ships plying the Ihala Route jumped through hyperspace between navigational beacons, with only the most daring pilots straying beyond this "lighthouse network." Xer's raiders used a wealth of navigational data to await ships in the interstellar dark between systems. The pirates liked to litter the spacelanes with chunks of ice that would trigger ships' collision-avoidance systems, dropping them into realspace; these hazards could later be melted with a fusillade of laser blasts.

Made rich by plunder, Xer's ambitions expanded accordingly. Already hailed the lord of Argai, he seized Dravione to create his own pocket realm. Argai was nominally part of the Kingdom of Cron, then centered around an arc of worlds from Janilis to Algor, but Cron was convulsed by its own intrigues, and the court on Chandaar paid little intention to Xer's growing power. Emboldened, he moved his forces down the Ihala Route, dismantling satrapies ruled by feckless Cronese younger sons and faded families founded by long-dead warlords. Within a decade the Kingdom of Argai extended from Dravione to Panna, and Xer could no longer be ignored.

The King of Cron, Ferece, summoned Xer to Chandaar, where he sought to buy off the pirate-lord with more noble titles in return for an oath of fealty. Legend has it Xer glowered at the slump-shouldered Ferece and his simpering, vain cliques of courtiers and said that he would return in a month with a tribute suitable for what he had found on Chandaar. He gathered a sizable fleet at Panna, smashed a Cronese battlegroup at Duinarbulon, and stormed the Cronese capital. After Ferece and his closest retainers fled, Xer was declared the



new King of Cron. Surveying the terrified court, he vowed the stars themselves would tremble at his name.

First to tremble, though, were the Cronese. It is said that Xer sent warlords and nobles he considered of possible worth into battle against rebellious Cronese worlds and independent planets on the kingdom's borders, taking their heirs hostage as guarantees of loyalty. Those he dismissed as useless were annihilated along with their families and followers. The most-feared warlord of the Cronese Sweeps wasn't Xer, however -- it was his teenage son, Xim. Xim's legions left none alive in the Timber Palace of Pasmin, set the royal barges of Eibon adrift in the heart of the Spiral, and razed the High Fane of Xo on Nuswatta, converting the theocracy to Xer's service via the business end of a beam-tube.

The Cronese Sweeps created a united, expansionist Kingdom of Cron boasting a battle-tested starfleet. Xer soon turned his attention beyond Cron's borders. He stormed Cadinth, Jaminere and Barseg, a trio of allied kingdoms on his rimward flank, and then moved against the worlds of the so-called Back Spiral, winning victories at Caluula, Brigia and Tion and building gleaming palaces on Raxus. Only one power managed to stand against the Pirate King: the Livien League, a confederation of worlds led by Livien, Desevro and Kanaver. The Livians defeated Cronese fleets at Amarin and then again at Lorrada.

The twin defeats infuriated Xer, but he took their lesson to heart, concluding that he had overextended himself. He retreated from the League's borders and spent the remainder of his rule forging Cron into an empire, extending its network of navigational beacons along the Back Spiral and the Cadinth Run and creating a bureaucracy equally efficient at war and commerce. But Xer made clear that his ambitions had been deferred, not denied. He organized Cron into three provinces ruled from Chandaar, Raxus Prime and Cadinth, but court rituals referred to the Four Thrones of Cron: those three worlds and the still-independent Desevro.

### **The Despot Triumphant**

Taking the Chandaar Throne upon Xer's retirement, Xim immediately sent his forces to Jhantoria, where they smashed the Livien League. He moved to raze Desevro, but was dissuaded by the planet's military ruler, Maslovar Tiatiov. Desevran history says Tiatiov took Xim on a tour of Desevro's fighting academies and government halls, showing the new Cronese king a bureaucracy even more

able than his own. And Xim was impressed by the Desevrars' tradition of training the sons of outlying worlds as janissaries and civil servants. Instead of making an example of Desevro for daring to oppose his father, Xim decided the Fourth Throne would drive territorial conquests that would make his father's ambitions seem small. With the Four Thrones under one crown, the Kingdom of Cron became the Empire of Xim.

It was the beginning of Xim's Expansionist Period, a decade-long effort that was simultaneously an enlightened program of colonization and imperial integration and a terrifying rampage. A civilization that had something to interest the Emperor could hope for the former; one that dared oppose him, or seemed unlikely to swell his coffers, could only await the latter.

Xim's legions first moved spinward, conquering worlds, building new beacons for the empire's navigational network and awaiting a wave of Tionesse colonists. In this fashion the empire gobbled up vast tracts of space. "Worthy" species such as the Vurk and Stenax were enslaved; others were exterminated and their names erased from history. Where Xim's forces found empty worlds (or emptied them), Tionesse colonists moved in, their numbers steadily increasing as part of Xim's strategy of conquest. The Thanium Worlds, which took their name from a military headquarters established early in Xim's spinward push, became the largest and richest of Xim's new provinces.

In the rimward reaches of the Thanium, Xim met a fierce challenge at Ranroon, whose queen's forces fought his invading janissaries bravely, bitterly and ultimately vainly. No character in *The Despotica* -- not even Xim himself -- is as vivid as Indrexu, the legendary Queen of Ranroon, and no historical figure is more argued about. Some scholars contend she is a literary invention of later

dramatists; others believe she existed, but argue about her role in Xim's empire and her ultimate fate. To some she is a minor figure, a fixture at Xim's court whose name has endured; to others she is the pivot around which the empire turned, her merest glance the spark that lit the fires of the Cronese Wars, Xim's expansion and everything thereafter. Whatever the truth, the Ihala Spiral was renamed in her honor, and the Far Indrexu became the sixth province of Xim's empire, with Yutusk the Sixth throne. At the edge of the Thanium Worlds lay the new worlds of what later generations would call the Gordian Reach. And beyond

those stars lay nothing -- a void marked by a mere sprinkling of systems with mostly barren worlds.

### **The Lost Thrones of Xim**

But no matter: Xim ruled a vast expanse of space, with hundreds of thousands of worlds filling his coffers. Shipyards and factories on Jaminere, Cadinth and Thanium turned out hulking warships clad in kiirium, massive beam-tubes for ground assaults and legions of lethal war droids. Other worlds crafted merchant ships and beacons, and Tionese artisans sought to outdo each other: Xim expanded or built vast palaces on Raxus, Amarin and Argai, and a royal retreat at Nuswatta, with its famous Gardens. For all but Xim's court, gazing upon the Gardens was a death sentence: According to legend they were tended by a cadre of slaves blinded at birth, and their soil enriched by the blood of traitors, failed military officers and vanquished adversaries. To glimpse the Forbidden Gardens was to know one's doom was at hand.

Xim's forces were also pushing beyond the Indrexu Spiral. There, it's recorded, they found systems settled by humans in ages before the rise of Cron and its rival Tion states. Xim's forces quickly expanded into these worlds as well; they were dubbed the Kiirium Reaches, and the lush planets Huronom and Astigone became the Seventh and Eighth Thrones of the empire.

For millennia the location of the Kiirium Reaches was the subject of much debate among scholars, for no systems with Xim-era names were known, and the surviving chronicles from Xim's time were written for people who knew perfectly well where the Reaches were. Suspicions focused on the Salin Corridor: Columex and Trogan were popular picks for ancient Huronom, and numerous luxury resorts on Centares bear the name Astigone. (Farther afield, the likes of Jabiim, Lucazec and even Lantillies were proposed as Lost Thrones.)

Ancient Tionese chronicles did reveal this much: In the Reaches Xim's forces encountered something surprising: Sakiyan and Nimbanel traders who served another civilization -- that of the sluglike Hutts. Xim was curious about these great gastropods. Here was a civilization he couldn't simply crush -- by all accounts the Hutts were many, powerful and ruthless. Could they coexist? Or would war prove inevitable?

Xim prepared for both. He poured riches into the Kiirium Reaches, extending the beacon network that provided safe passage for both warships and trade vessels. He sent traders and scouts on to strange stars never visited by the Tionese, then had his feared GenoHeradan interrogate them about what they found. And legend has it he himself explored strange stars, ranging as far as distant Pelgrin, whose legendary Oracle he supposedly visited.

### **War with the Hutts**

Xim's scouts not only found many wonders but also gave the Despot a portrait of the Hutts' possessions. One of the outlying Hutt worlds was lush Ko Vari, a boomworld not far from Xim's borders. Hutt trade routes led from there back to a tangle of satrapies in which the Hutts and their vassals schemed and intrigued. Beyond these worlds lay Sleheyron, a treasure world that marked the boundaries of the Hutts' true dominion, and into which only the most trusted slaves were allowed.

Xim didn't decide on war at once -- in fact, negotiations between his courtiers and the Hutts' vassals led to an embassy on Ko Vari, attended by two dozen Hutt nobles. Tionese records say Xim sent his most-trusted counselor, whose name is remembered by the Hutts as Oziaf the Insignificant, and whose presence seems to have been regarded as a grievous insult. But the Hutts could not ignore Xim's accomplishments, and so they offered him and the Tionese the chance to be particularly favored slaves. That smacked of the Cronese treatment of his father, and Xim remembered well what Xer's response had been. Determined to burn the Hutts' worlds, he returned to Chandaar and claimed the title Daritha -- Ruler of Worlds -- in a lavish ceremony.

His beacon network pushed endlessly onward down the spacelane called the Warriors' Trace, its fortresses established along a line paralleling the Hutts' worlds. Finally, Xim's forces reached far enough to flank Sleheyron. In the 25th year of his rule, Xim launched a two-pronged strike at Sleheyron and Ko Vari.

Hutt legends hold that the sack of Ko Vari was singularly brutal; both Hutt and Tionese accounts admit that Xim's drive toward Sleheyron failed: The Despot's warships were driven back to Xo's Eye (later known as Kessel), where many were lost in a nest of black holes. But despite this victory, the Hutts realized they had badly underestimated this new species and its leader -- the Tionese controlled

many worlds, bred like vermin, and turned out new warships with frightening speed.

The Hutts stalled for time, defending Sleheyron and paying privateers of all species to harass Xim's borders. And the leader of the Hutts, Kossak, manipulated the Daritha rather ably, demanding to know what kind of leader hid behind sheer numbers, instead of proving his bravery in ritual combat.

After repeated taunts, Xim accepted the Hutt lord's invitation to fight at Vontor - a site long used for Hutt ritual combats, and a rich source of increasingly scarce kiirium.

As with all of Xim's deeds, accounts of the clashes at Vontor greatly depending on who tells the tale. Scholars of the First Battle of Vontor agree on this much: Combat was joined around 25,100 BBY, and Xim's pilots were outmaneuvered by the Hutts and their slave species. Xim had lost, and by way of penalty was required to withdraw his forces from all worlds claimed by the Hutts. To Xim, this meant nothing -- how could the Hutts claim a world they didn't physically possess? He rebuilt his forces, certain that his defeat was but a temporary setback, akin to the brief resistance of the Livien League. So certain was he of victory that he dubbed Sleheyron the Ninth Throne, drew up plans for how the Hutt territories would be divided into provinces, and sent newly built warships into the Si'klaata Cluster to raid Kintan, Klatooine and Vodran.

A year later Kossak challenged him to a second ritual combat. To his shock, Xim lost this confrontation as well, though the battle cost Kossak dearly. Xim's warlords warned him that Hutt raiders were loose in the Kiirium Reaches, and suggested that it would be best for the Daritha to relinquish his dreams of conquest and fortify the vast empire he'd won so ably.

Xim regarded this as tantamount to treason, and those who offered such advice found themselves on a final journey to Nuswatta. He bought time by offering a concession -- he withdrew the Tionese from Moralan, a Hutt system whose native species had successfully rebelled, with Tionese encouragement, against their masters. (Moralan was prompted overrun by the Hutts and sterilized. ) But he refused to surrender Ko Vari, which the Tionese had made their own, and all but emptied his treasuries building new warships and droid armies.

The Hutts, however, had also built up their forces. Boonta the Hutt, who'd led the extermination of Moralan, retook Ko Vari. With the Hutts and Xim on the brink of total war, Kossak proposed a third ritual combat. Win, and Xim could have Ko Vari and what was left of Moralan. Lose, and he would renounce all claim to the Kiirium Reaches.

Xim agreed; by then no advisor remained who dared to dissuade him. The Daritha and his fiercest janissaries, backed by legions of new war droids, descended from the orbital fortresses he'd brought to Vontor so that his court could witness his triumph. But the Hutts countered with numberless Nikto, Vodran and Klatooinian warriors bound to servitude by a new treaty. Xim sent his warships into the fray, but to no avail: His war droids were pulled down and dismantled by wave after wave of spice-maddened Klatooinian berserkers, his orbital fortresses were bombarded and his ships were decimated. (And, some scholars argue, he was betrayed by his own commanders.) Xim was not just defeated but captured, and paraded in chains through Hutt Space. Scholars disagree on both the date and manner of his death; some say he died at Vontor, others that he was taken to Varl and blinded, and died a slave in Kossak's dungeons.

### **The Devouring**

A number of seemingly disparate Tionese religious and cultural traditions include a winter holiday that include the veneration of symbols of Xim, offerings to propitiate demons, and displays of repentance. These holidays are marked in any number of ways, from solemn to seemingly playful. On the windswept moors of Stalimur, pious males light candles and spend the night in silent confession at shrines built for the occasion, atoning for the sins of the previous year; in the slums of Barseg, children dress as evil spirits and are visited by their neighbors, who offer sweets in return for a year's blessing. The Barsegi call their holiday Wakemeet, but the Stalimurans and others give the night of atonement a far more chilling name: the Devouring.

For millennia scholars have agreed this holiday must recall a real event -- but what event? Most considered it a Nuswattan holy day subverted by Xim for his own purposes. Others suggested it reached back to some long-ago cataclysm that sundered the Tionese from the rest of humanity, or that it was older still -- a

racial memory of servitude to the Rakata, perhaps. Revisionist scholars, meanwhile, contended it was newer -- a garbled retelling of the Tion's defeat by the young Republic.

Today the generally accepted theory is that first put forth some 30 years ago by the Corellian merchant, philosopher and historian Bleys Harand.

For eons, the star systems to trailing of the Tion Cluster have been called the Ash Worlds -- a name so widely known that the Republic adopted it for that sector of space. Few hyperspace routes wend through these lonely precincts of space, and thousands upon thousands of worlds there are barren, many still bearing the invisible scars of radiation. Astronomers have scoured the area searching for the remnants of a supernova or some other natural event, but nothing has ever been found.

Harand sent his students (including his protégé Henrietya Antilles ) on secret expeditions to the Ash Worlds, then part of Wild Space. They reported that radiation levels on many of those forlorn planets fit the profile of fission attacks some 25 millennia before. The Hutts were known for carelessly poisoning worlds and for exterminating slave species, which had led most scholars to suggest that the Ash Worlds were a Hutt domain used up in eons past. Harand argued that the Ash Worlds were a remnant of the Kiirium Reaches, and the Devouring was a memory of a genocidal campaign waged by the Hutts against the Tionese.

The newborn Empire interdicted many of the Ash Worlds, using them for weapons testing and other activities best conducted far from the Core. With further explorations impossible, Harand's followers searched tirelessly for surviving records in the Tion. Antilles' discovery of the Great Duinarbulon Mausoleum (and her work to decipher the tomes inside) proving Harand correct: The Antilles Map found in the Mausoleum showed that the hostile world of Wyndigal II was once Huronom, while anonymous OHS3842-03 had been Astigone.

According to the Duinarbulon Archives and records recovered by Ruurian archaeologists on Dellalt , the victorious Hutts raided the Kiirium Reaches for slaves and regarded them as fair game for the ambitions of young Hutt princelings, but left the worlds more or less unharmed for centuries after the Daritha's death. But all that changed around 24,500 BBY, when a new branch of

humanity arrived from the distant center of the galaxy. These humans skirmished with their Tionese cousins, leading the Hutts to believe they were witnessing something familiar: a clan war. If so, the defeated clan would agree to serve the victors, uniting these humans against their other potential enemies.

The Hutts, remembering all too well that Xim had been a fearsome opponent, moved ruthlessly to create a buffer between themselves and the Tion Cluster by invoking the terms of the Third Battle of Vontor: Within the old borders of the Kiirium Reaches they exterminated the Tionese to the last man, woman and child. Their settlements were vaporized, their worlds bombarded and poisoned, their histories and eventually even their names erased. Xim's beacons were destroyed, dismantled or towed away for the Hutts' own purposes, leaving future explorers to find new routes through the desolation. Fearing imminent ruin, the hierophants of Xo fled Nuswatta to found a new stronghold where they would await the climactic battle between humanity and the Hutts that would usher in the end of time and the Perfection of Xo. (The Tionese never heard from them again.)

Only along the Warriors' Trace were the old beacons left intact and a few Tionese worlds spared -- and that was only to preserve a Hutt invasion corridor to the Tion and make sure there were hostages to take along the way. Some of those beacons still exist today in the vicinity of what is now known as the Salin Corridor -- mute relics of a vanished empire.

### **The Hand of Xim**

While many Tionese claim descent from the Despot, Xim is believed to have died with no legitimate heirs. After Xim's death, the center of his empire held together for nearly a century -- a testament to the strength of the institutions he and Xer had built. But by the time of the Devouring, the empire had fragmented into brawling states: the Kingdom of Cron, the Jaminere Marches, the Indrexu Confederation, the Keldrath Alignment, the Thanium Worlds and the Honorable Union of Desevro and Tion would spend centuries struggling against each other, the Core and the Hutts, until their ancient glories were little more than legends to enliven a dreary backwater.



In the Republic's final years, the Cluster's disparate states joined up to form two tattered dominions: the Tion Hegemony and the Kingdom of Cron. Both became Separatist hotbeds during the Clone Wars, and paid the price after the rise of the Empire. The Empire allowed the Hegemony a humiliatingly nominal independence, but carved out the Allied Tion, Indrexu and Keldrath into sectors, alongside the renamed Cronese Mandate and the shrunken Hegemony. Talk of reunification proceeded by fits and starts after the Empire's demise, with the New Republic seemingly showing little interest in the region. The Yuuzhan Vong raided the Cluster's border worlds, but did substantial damage only to Caluula. The Tion's time has long since passed, the name of Xim remains powerful -- an evocation of a period of galactic history at once barbaric and heroic, many of whose triumphs, horrors and mysteries are yet to be investigated.

### **Significant Worlds of the Tion Cluster and the Historical Greater Tion**

#### **The Cronese Mandate**

The Cronese Mandate includes hundreds and hundreds of populated worlds alongside numerous uninhabited ones. The Cronese tend to aloofness, mindful of their imperial past and often dismissing their Tionese neighbors as unsophisticated peasants -- Cron has always looked to the rest of the galaxy in a way the rest of the Tion hasn't. Its principal worlds are along the Cronese Arc; the Kismaano Bypass and the Indrexu Route connect it to the Allied Tion, while some traders follow the Arc to Saheelindeel and the worlds of the Tion Hegemony's Back Spiral.

**Arcan** -- A busy port on the Perlemian for millennia, Arcan IV is the Cronese Mandate's principal spaceport and a fairly prosperous system with numerous mining concerns.

**Janilis** -- Already old in Xim's time, Janilis VII was one of the cradles of Cronese civilization, a lush planet favored by Cron's nobles. It remains populous today, but is a rundown world with a subsistence economy. The Cronese charge exorbitant rates to researchers who want to poke through its archives in search of lost documents from Xim's era.

**Chandaar** -- The capital of the Cronese Mandate, Chandaar was the original throneworld of Cron and the second of the Xim Thrones. It remains the royal seat of Cron, now ruled by figureheads. Today Chandaar is a polluted, decaying urban world, home to many Cronese mining companies. Its surface is dotted with soulless modern cityscapes and ancient ruins attesting to its ancient glories.

**Oor** -- In ancient times Oor VII was a humming factory world, but millennia of environmental degradation have left it parched and thinly populated.

**Barancar** -- Originally a thriving merchant port, Barancar was ringed with orbital shipyards in Xim's day. Millennia of war and decay have left most of the yards derelict, but fitful industry still struggles along here and there. Many of the ancient docks are now the lairs of smugglers and outlaws.

**Soruus** -- During Xim's reign Soruus was a booming tradeworld famous for gladiatorial spectacles, a tradition that has continued to thrive even as most other commerce has ebbed.

**Pasmin** -- A tradeworld in Xim's time, Pasmin remains known for its skilled weavers, who labor at their craft much as their distant ancestors did.

**Arramanx** -- A lawless urban world, Arramanx's slums are notorious throughout the Tion. Law-abiding star-hoppers from the Allied Tion do their business at a number of scuzzy but serviceable orbital stations, while those carrying illegal cargoes try their luck planetside.

**Duinarbulon** -- One of the eldest Cronese worlds, Duinarbulon's proud warriors served Xer and Xim as avidly as they had the Cron lords. The mightiest Duin aspired to become Duinarbulon Lancers, who served Xim on countless worlds before their defeat at the Second Battle of Vontor. Legend has it that seven massive stones of polished ebon, now long-vanished, marked the Lancers' parade grounds. Duinarbulon is a pastoral world relatively unscathed by the Cluster's long history of unrest.

**Derellium** -- A leading agricultural world of the Tion, Derellium is famous locally for its wines. Some Cronese wine collections include centuries-old Derellium vintages.

**Eibon** -- One of Cron's eldest and most-powerful worlds, Eibon has been known for millennia for its proud, independent people, whom even Xer and Xim treated with respect. The Eibon Scimitar, one of Xim's flagships, was destroyed at the First Battle of Vontor.

**Algor** -- Algorians are famed for their disputatiousness, which is the subject of many a joke in the Cluster, and their ferocity as pirates. Many early tales of Xim and Xer celebrate their victories over Algorian raiders, though such tales are less popular on grimy, urban Algor.

**Foran Tutha** -- A barren world on the edge of the Tion Cluster, Foran Tutha would be just another anonymous rock if not for the discovery of the Foran Tutha star probe. Scholars have argued for five centuries whether the fragments of this unimaginably ancient starship are remnants of Celestial, Rakatan or early Core technology; they seem certain to argue for five centuries more.

**Kismaano** -- A rich mining world on the Kismaano Bypass, Kismaano has long stood apart from the rest of Cron, which has never trusted its canny merchants. Kismaano's surface is swept by high winds, and its eldest settlements were built in the sides of canyons and rifts. These cliffside dwellings have been tourist attractions for millennia.

**Gadon** -- A mining world, Gadon has long chafed at the domination of its powerful neighbor Kismaano.

**Panna** -- The Panna system is a tangle of asteroid belts surrounding a trio of gas giants, home to bold prospectors, hardscrabble traders, pirates and outlaws. Its best-known settlement is Panna City, a battered spaceport on Panna Prime, a moon notable for its thick, gelid seas.

**Corlass** -- As with the other Cronese systems huddled against the Indrexu Spiral, Corlass has a long history of piracy, interrupted by periods of sullen lawfulness compelled by strong Cronese governments. Xim admired the Corlassi for their bravery and skill as spacers, and former Corlassi buccaneers captained many of his warships.

**Argai** -- The homeworld of Xer and Xim, Argai was the site of the Despot's grandest palace, now little more than scattered stones rounded by the eons.

**Nuswatta** -- The last grisly sacrifices were performed unimaginably long ago, and the hierophants of Xo are long gone, but Nuswatta remains an object of curiosity to a galaxy raised on tales of the ghastly doings here. In theory only Cronese may visit Nuswatta and view the ruins of its fabled Gardens, though in practice most humans can bribe their way onto the planet. Nonhumans face considerable danger trying to travel there, however, as nearly all Cronese (and many Tionese) consider aliens' presence on Nuswatta taboo.

### **The Allied Tion**

The Allied Tion has little historical identity, having been carved out of the Tion Hegemony by the Empire. Traditionally, this area was a buffer between the Hegemony and Cron, with Lianna, Barseg, Cadinth and Jaminere jostling for influence. Today the Allied Tion is known for its manufacturing and trade. The Cadinth Run sees a great deal of traffic, though little of that passes beyond Jaminere to the Indrexu Route and the Desevran Trace.

**Lianna** -- One of the busiest ports in the Tion Cluster, Lianna is the headquarters of Santhe/Sienar Technologies. Lianna prides itself on its independence and power, but such airs arouse snickers among many Tionese. The questionable Liannan claim never to have been ruled by Xim is much mocked, as during the Despot's reign Lianna was a bleak agricultural world with a few thousand inhabitants.

**Barseg** -- Perhaps the most arrogant of all Tionese, the Barsegi regard their neighbors with ill-concealed contempt, loftily informing any who ask (and many who don't) that Barseg was an interstellar power before the Chandaarians even reached the stars. Barseg's castes are ancient and stunningly rigid, with many on the grim tradeworld performing the same duties their distant ancestors did.

**Lorrad** -- This grimy urban world was enslaved by Barseg for millennia, with many Lorradians living in harrowing conditions. The planet has been free of its neighbor since the Republic brought Barseg to heel around 300 BBY, but its economic servitude remains much the same.

**Spinax** -- Spinax occupies a romantic place in the Tion, famous for its long tradition of leviathan-hunters. For ages these hunters took to the sea in flimsy vessels to hunt giant crustaceans with a dim, malevolent intelligence and tough,

flexible skeletons useful for a range of crafts. Careless undersea mining has long polluted Spinax's seas, however, and the last leviathans died centuries ago.

**Cadinth** -- A world of black sands and howling winds, Cadinth has long been known for its mineral wealth and as the site of numerous battles, sitting as it does at the center of the Tion Cluster. Renowned as the Third Throne of Xim, it is dotted with gloomy, sharp-featured cities that self-consciously evoke the distant past.

**Embaril** -- One of the Tion's least-spoiled worlds, Embaril's green hills and crystalline lakes attract wealthy nobles from throughout the Cluster and even some parts beyond.

**Voss** -- The Empire poured credits into this unremarkable mining world when it created the Allied Tion. Imperial hopes of creating an industrial powerhouse to balance the influence of Lianna soon faded, however, as Voss quickly fell under the sway of corrupt Tionese clans.

**Jaminere** -- The capital of the Allied Tion, Jaminere is a powerful manufacturing world admired for its rather un-Tionese efficiency. In the centuries after Xim's death Jaminere's rule stretched from Embaril and Desargorr to Amarin and Argai, and its influence remains strong in the sector.

**Dravione** -- Long ago supplanted by Jaminere, Dravione is a bleak agricultural world notable for a handful of Xim-era aeries that are remarkably well-preserved by the thin air.

**Corlax** -- An unremarkable industrial world, Corlax spent millennia changing hands between Desevro and Jaminere before becoming one of the Separatists' leading sources of war materiel during the Clone Wars.

**Amarin** -- One of the Tion's busiest agri-worlds, Amarin was a hunting reserve during Xim's time, and tradition has preserved its thick, cool forests ever since, offering a small respite from the wreckage of so much else in the Cluster.

**Desargorr** -- A mountainous world rich in minerals, Desargorr is pitted by millennia of ruthless mining, as are the system's numerous moons, asteroids and comets.

## **The Tion Hegemony**

The Hegemony is divided into two quite different regions: the cluster of systems at the head of the Desevran Run, and the string of systems beyond the Indrexu, along the Tion Trade Route in what's known as the Back Spiral. The former rose to prominence as the Livien League; often called the Livien Worlds, they include some of humanity's eldest cultures. The Back Spiral worlds are mostly poor, and have little to do economically or culturally with the Livien Worlds.

**Desevro** -- This ancient, rotted city-planet has a long, bitter history: It began as the leading world of the Livien League, provided Xim's empire with military discipline and flawless organization as his Fourth Throne, and then led the Honorable Union of Desevro and Tion into war against the young Republic. But it became a backwater ages ago, and now is steeped in millennia of bitterness.

**Livien** -- The founding world of the ancient Livien League, Livien now barely even has its lost glories to sustain it, having stumbled into a long twilight as a subsistence agricultural world pocked with ruins.

**Kanaver** -- An ancient Livien world, Kanaver has shaken off centuries of torpor to re-engage with the galaxy, becoming a busy port serving the rimward systems of the Perlemian, the Hegemony worlds of the Back Spiral, and the planets of the Mon Cal-dominated trade route known as the Overic Griplink.

**Folende** -- A middling agri-world for centuries, Folende upped its production substantially in the final decades of the Republic under mysterious circumstances, becoming a provider of staples to the impoverished worlds of the Far Perlemian.

**Omman** -- An agricultural competitor of Folende's, Omman became an Imperial garrison after the fall of the Republic, with the Empire using the planet as a base from which it could keep an eye on the Mon Calamari and Rebel rumblings in the restive Back Spiral.

**Abraxin** -- A misty world tucked into a fold in the Indrexu Spiral, Abraxin has long had a dubious reputation among the Tionese, who as children hear spooky stories of the planet's marsh haunts and then grow up to find Abraxin's soothsayers and poets are witchy, too. The planet is known for spirits of the liquid variety as well.

**Raxus** -- In Xer's time Raxus was dubbed the Circlet of the Tion, its shorelines crowned with marble palaces and the floors of its warm lagoons decorated with colorful tiles. It enjoyed a renaissance around 14,300 BBY as the central world of the realm known as Nikato's Bootheel, with the Machinists of Nikato making its earlier adornments seem paltry. But in later millennia Raxus became a dank hell of industrial filth, a birthplace of foul weapons and dark plots that proved attractive to numerous enemies of the Republic, from the Sith to the Separatists.

**Tion** -- The world that gives the Cluster its name is actually one of its minor planets, a placid waterworld circling a pair of brilliant cyan stars at a distance (and visible far beyond the Cluster's borders). Tion's trio of moons house industrial operations and an unexceptional spaceport.

**Argoon** -- A motley manufacturing world, Argoon is typical of the Back Spiral in having long looked to the more-prosperous worlds of the Keldrath and Pakuuni sectors rather than to the Livien Worlds.

**Rudrig** -- This lush planet has long been the home of the University of Rudrig, which draws promising students from worlds as distant as Arda and Centares. While some of its departments are lazy and reactionary, others offer a rare chance to consider the future without being oppressed by the Tion's past.

**Clariv** -- A busy shipyard, Clariv conducts much of its business for Keldrath and Pakuuni interests. It was the target of brutal Imperial subjugation shortly before the Battle of Yavin for what were (correctly) perceived as Rebel sympathies.

**Eredenn** -- Eredenn IV is a frozen world that turns lush and green during its brief summers. It was the site of fierce fighting during the Clone Wars.

**Kaon** -- This hard-to-reach, little-remarked Back Spiral world became a secret base during the Clone Wars, and was rumored to be a headquarters for Count Dooku.

**Stalimur** -- This stormy world is known for the surliness of its dour farmers and the viciousness of its pirates, who have haunted the system's tumbling asteroid belts for eons.

**Orion** -- Orion IV is a run-of-the-mill manufacturing world that tipped into near-open rebellion shortly before the Battle of Yavin and was crushed by the Empire.

**Brigia** -- A restive world economically dominated by the Pakuuni, Brigia was watched carefully by the Empire during its crackdown on the Back Spiral. It was invaded by the Yuuzhan Vong and Vongformed, but much of the ecological changes seemed to retreat within the next decade, leading scientists to fear the bioweapon Alpha Red had somehow been introduced from neighboring Caluula. Scientists have monitored the planet carefully since then.

**Caluula** -- Depopulated by the Vong, this lush world was where Alpha Red was illegally and recklessly field-testing. The bioweapon slew the Vong and their creations, but then mutated and began taking a toll on native species. A quarantine of the planet failed in the chaos after the Vong War, but those leaving the planet are subject to thorough decontamination procedures.

**Saheelindeel** -- This rural world is the home of the Saheelindeeli, a furred bipedal species employed throughout in the Cluster as low-wage workers. They are simultaneously valued for their industriousness and disliked for their sly ways.

**Dellalt** -- This unremarkable world was once a key military holding of Xim's, housing the Despot's legendary treasure vaults. For millennia the vaults were thought to be empty, but shortly before the Battle of Yavin, the true treasure vaults were discovered beneath the vacant chambers. The war materiel and records found inside were no longer of military use, but have drawn archaeologists ever since.

### **Indrexu Sector**

The worlds of the Far Perlemian were of little interest to the Republic during its final years, and slavers, pirates and Separatists often had free reign there. The Indrexu sector -- a name that recalled the Indrexu Confederation which held sway here eons ago -- was carved out of the Hegemony in an effort to keep the restive Indrexu worlds from making common cause with their Livien neighbors.

**Ank Ki'Shor** -- A manufacturing world willing to do business with most anybody, Ank Ki'Shor became a key supplier to the Rebel Alliance in its formative years -- and was the site of an early Rebel show of force when Y-wings defended its population against Imperial bombardment.



**Janodral Mizar** -- This riotous trade world has long burst at the seams with scouts, freebooters and starhoppers. Mizarians have little patience for their gloomy Tionese kin, and reflexively lash out at anybody who tries to impose order on them.

**Estaria** -- This spaceport is a crossroads for traffic going between the Far Perlemian and the Tion, and is only moderately corrupt by Tionese standards.

**Endregaad** -- A backwater even for the Back Spiral, Endregaad is a nearly-forgotten world with a subsistence economy.

### **Keldrath Sector**

This sector was also carved out of the Hegemony in an effort to create a buffer, in this case between the Pakuuni domination of their sector and the Tionese. The effort was ill-researched and backfired -- that part of the Hegemony had always gravitated to Pakuuni anyway, and the new sector immediately fell under its neighbor's sway.

**Gbu** -- A high-gravity world, Gbu is home to the Veubgri, an insect species prized as valuable laborers able to work in highly pressurized atmospheres.

**Mullan** -- History seems to have skipped Mullan, which has long been known for its placid people and steady flow of good, simple wines and hearty foodstuffs.

### **The Thanium Worlds**

These far-flung worlds were remade by Xim's forces during the Expansionist Period and formed the industrial engine of his empire. They once stretched to the edges of the Radama Void, including worlds later known as part of the Sith Empire and the Gordian Reach. The rimward portions of the Thanium Worlds were known in Xim's time as the Far Indrexu. While the Thanium Worlds survive as the name of a modern sector, the eons have remade these planets so utterly that they bear few traces of Xim's rule.

**Thanium** -- Once an industrial world synonymous with military might and capable of striking fear in Xim's enemies, the Fifth Throne remains a commercial world -- but one distinguishable from its neighbors only because of its name.

**Yutusk** -- The Sixth Throne is now a quiet world in the Mortex sector known primarily for its farms, with its ancient fame likely to elicit wry shrugs from locals.

**Ranroon** -- Ranroon, at least, retains some of the feel of the rancorous, matriarchal world that bitterly opposed Xim's forces. It's a world of dizzying peaks and clifftop aeries, where ancient traditions are proudly held and outsiders regarded with deep suspicion.

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# THE DESPOTICA

(SELECTIONS)  
ED. PROFESSOR S.V. SKYNN

## **The Despotica (Part I)**

By Michael Kogge; Illustration by Cat Staggs

*to Brian, In Eternal Homage  
and Professor Robert A. Vacca*

*From Ronton's Anthology to Galactic Literature, Vol. 2*

## **Introduction**

(reprinted from *The Despotica Reader*, Third Edition)

Name-drop "Xim" in any cantina on a thousand disparate worlds and you will either spark the most laconic of Mandalorians into lively conversation or find a banged-up DL-44 triggered at your neural cluster. Few individuals in galactic lore ignite more passion, fascination, and outright hostility than Xim of Argai--or Xim "the Despot" as he's known in the vernacular. His is a name synonymous with the most brutal of tyrants, those once-in-an-epoch mass-murderers who cause the stars to shudder and give religious zealots fodder to substantiate their claims of Evil Incarnate<sup>1</sup>.

But the galaxy has experienced thousands of equally detestable despots since Xim's reign some 25,000 years ago, many of whom conquered far larger reaches of spaces and committed far more heinous crimes. Why then are they pushed backstage behind our communal hatred of Xim? Why does Xim devour their sinister legacies like an all-consuming black hole? Why has the terror of Xim's

name spread beyond all others to systems he never enslaved and species he never spaced?

Moreover, it would be fraudulent to limit this inquiry to the purview of history. For if Xim truly is one of the most loathed individuals on the galactic record, one must ask why his name usually tops the bestseller lists? Why do publishers invoke the Despot whenever they fall on hard times, pumping out slews of "updated" treasure maps to his long-lost vaults, not to mention sensational biographies such as *Beloved Xim, Our First Despot* or self-improvement guides like *Xim's Rules for Ruling*? Why do tourists keep booking on Ranroon Cruise Lines for a sightseer's package holiday to the locales of Xim's atrocities? Since we despise Xim so much, why can't we all do ourselves a favor and just forget about him?

Show business, any holo fan will tell you, is show business. For even after twenty-five millennia, no one brings down the house quite like the Despot.

### **Birth of a Blockbuster**

Penury has a funny effect on those struggling to make it in the entertainment industry: their prayers to the infernal muse of Xim multiply near debt-collection days. While nothing is a sure thing, trying yet another take on the Despot is a solid bet for "hitting it big" and paying off the most pertinacious skip-tracers. Even a cursory glance at box-office receipts reinforces the prevailing wisdom that audiences never tire of Xim's fabled rise and fall. For years untold, the Argai Players have presented an annual showcase of Lyechusas's trilogies without an empty seat in the house. So ingrained in our collective consciousness is Peshosloc's version of the Third Battle of Vontor that we could lose every copy and re-tell it scene-by-scene a thousand years later. And even assassin droids of the IG series have been observed leaking lubricants when listening to the end of *Evocar* by the Good Hutt Direus'pei.

To the lament of many of my colleagues, truth and verisimilitude are unwonted elements in practically all of these productions. Dramatists seem to go out of their way to eschew historical evidence, since the last thing audiences crave is a reminder of the block period lectures from their Academy days. But give those audiences a Xim who outdoes his own infamy, who lives up to his reputation as the most nefarious villain in the twelve dimensions, and they will flock to the

theaters, snap-glue their ears to speaker grilles, even pay top datarie to watch holographic re-cons of his First, Second, and Third Battles.

In this instance, popular opinion may have better served the galaxy. By turning a blind eye to fact and showering Evil Incarnate with their hard-earned credits, audiences have inspired the greatest of all collaborative arts projects, *The Despotica*.

### **Mythology for the Everybeing**

With a printed output spanning the length of an old *Victory*-class destroyer, *The Despotica* is unlike anything in our galaxy.<sup>2</sup> Its lure of quick riches and fast fame has enticed both celebrated artistes and venerable hacks alike to take their stabs at Xim, generating a variety of contents so unique it requires the editors at *Ronton's Galactic Dictionary* to expand their definition of literature approximately every other year. In its pages one can find everything dreamt under the moons of Iego, including grand librettos and avant-garde performance pieces, puppet show scripts and aural space operas, one-tyrant monologues and modern holo-horrors, and occasionally, the brilliant but unproduced holoplay.

Admittedly, most of these contributions are middle-of-the-road in quality, entertaining yet vapid stories dashed off for the easy money. But in the tangleweeds of mediocrity one may discover a glow-pearl of a line, a poem worthy of a Bynarrian jig, or a scene as blood-chillingly tender as anything in the novelettes of Nesslax. With each passing year, the story of Xim only grows in the telling, as eager young dramatists program their auto-styli to meet Peshosloc's challenge: "if holowright desire you be, duel the Despot first you must." It is this motley jumble of the amateur and the masterful--a galactic resistance to a canon of quality--that imparts *The Despotica* with its unrivaled originality and has propelled Xim across the cultural-species divide into the pantheon of universal monsters.

### **Bad Reputation**

Twenty-five millennia of dramaturgical warfare has indeed taken its toll on the Despot: a catalog of sins so diabolical has been ascribed to him that Palpatine seems a saint in contrast. While few in the public would confide to believing every one of Xim's alleged crimes, fewer still seem to care that most of what

they know about him is fiction, cooked up by writers starving for the spotlight. Instead, the lasting popularity of *The Despotica* has given our civilization a depository to dump the most inscrutable and unforgivable evils of our past, wherein we make Xim the surrogate for our own demons, and consequently exorcise ourselves of any culpability in those abominable deeds.

"Poor Xim," wrote the former Imperial Laureate, Ebenn Q3 Baobab, "never has so much been slandered of a man about whom so little is known."

### **Xim the True**

Doubtless then will a reader wonder about the despot who existed before *The Despotica*, the Xim of history and not of myth. Such inquiries are more easily pondered than answered. To this day, Xim's origins remain cloaked in mystery and controversy, further muddled by the countless biographies, documentaries, and HoloNews investigative reports that purport to reveal--"at long last"--the true and full story of Xim the Despot. These often rely on tangential bits and threads from *The Despotica* to make their case. Blame should not lay entirely with their authors; no matter how diligent and objective the historian, it is next to impossible to escape the influence of *The Despotica*, so thoroughly does it inform our historical perspective. The real Xim, whoever he was, lived only a few decades in the long-ago past, while *The Despotica* has captivated our imaginations for millennia.

The scant evidence xenoarchaeologists have unearthed corroborates what is written about him in the ancient chronicles. Xim was born into a family of pirates some 25,000 years ago, probably on the planet Argai. He found such success following the example of his father, Xer, robbing and raiding the spacelanes that he was able to extort exorbitant sums from the merchant guilds in return for leaving their freighters unmolested. He then spent his plunder amassing an armada and army of automatons that eclipsed even the forces of the major trading magnates of the day, the Hutt clans. Once uncontested on all fronts, Xim proclaimed himself the Daritha, Cronese for "Ruler of Worlds," and his ascent to galactic despotism began.

## **Despot or *Despotica*?**

History blurs into hearsay and rumor at this point, with *The Despotica* taking the lead. Its volumes brim with classic box-office bait, tales of torture and mass murder, planetary devastation and colossal carnage. And with a flip of every flimsy page the tempest mushrooms, as subsequent waves of contributors strive to upstage their predecessors in devising new torments their Xim can unleash on the galaxy.

Truth be told, Xim may have been held in high esteem during his lifetime. One achievement that has gone virtually unheralded in the last decade is that scholars have pieced together a smattering of quotes from primary, non-Tionese sources that praise a "bold buccaneer" for standing up to "the Worms." Furthermore, questions remain concerning the actual causes of a planetary disaster on Boonta, known in antiquity as Ko Vari, an outlying Hutt satrapy that Xim is renowned for ravaging after the Hutts disparaged his ambassador. Though astronomical studies show that the planet did suffer a kind of major cataclysm sometime in its past, the Hutts permit no historical probes or archeological digs in or around the Dernatine system, in respect to those Hutts whom Xim supposedly liquefied into radioactive mud. Yet a new study of the planetary atmosphere by the Drall chemist Leeratt suggests that this catastrophe may have occurred well after the time of Xim, upholding stories that the Hutt war-scientist, Boonta, who reconquered the world, had used it as a testing site for centuries of extermination experiments.

Perhaps the fiercest debate revolves around the scope of Xim's power. Some academics concur with the accounts in *The Despotica* that Xim controlled over half of the galaxy at the time, though others maintain that legend overshadows fact, and the Many Thrones of Xim's "empire" consisted merely of what is considered the backwater's backwash, the Tion Hegemony.

A recent expedition in that sector, of which this author played a part, has bolstered the case that Xim was more than just a dread pirate lord. The team acquired artifacts that finally validate the most challenged icon of *The Despotica*: Xim's fearsome war-robots. As yours truly will personally attest, these 'bots are no tin-plated battle droids--the death's head ablaze on their chests more than meets their design.

## Revenge of the Worms

Given the stark contrast between the primary sources and *The Despotica*, the late Sal Ransen of the Obroan Institute has suggested that perhaps Xim was not the malicious tyrant of legend, but rather the victim of vindictive Hutt propaganda. Ransen argues that the Hutts were incensed by Xim's forays into their territories. Prevented from mobilizing their forces because of internecine squabbling, the clans instead waged a war of innuendo, sliming Xim with every conceivable barbarity their vile minds could excrete. "The problem with Hutt slime," Ransen said at the 343rd Conference of Despotism, "is that no matter how hard you rub, their filth just won't come off."

Finding tangible evidence of any sustained propaganda campaign is almost unfeasible, since Hutt culture appears fundamentally opposed to retaining permanent records. But the Hutts do orally keep their own version of history. Ask any Hutt about Xim, and he, she, or it will spit tirades that surpass the most shocking parts of *The Despotica*. According to Hutt lips, Xim ruled like a homicidal lunatic, eliminating anyone who hindered his path to power, demolishing entire civilizations for sheer pleasure, and laying utter waste to lush worlds--like Ko Vari--where many species lived in peaceful harmony with the Hutts.

Sensational atrocities aside, whatever Xim did aeons ago rankled the Hutts so profoundly that they postponed their frivolous feuds and squirmed together under a single banner. Only then did Xim face a legitimate challenge.

## Hero of Hutts

During any convocation of the Hutt Council of Elders, a vacant hover-throne floats above the rest, in tribute to General Kossak Inijic Ar'durv, "Devourer of Despots." He remains one of the sole members of his species about whom his brethren will never speak ill. While Xim profanes, Kossak's name binds the most sacred of clan oaths. His statuette decorates many a paddy frog tank; whole star skiffs have been forged in his image. His strategies of sabotage and subterfuge are practiced by Huttlets and clans leaders alike, and are believed to have inspired Budhila Hestilic Amura's kajidic philosophy. On Nal Hutta, adoring supplicants go so far as to polish his giant bronze bust with their own ooze. For a

species repulsed by hero-worship, the Hutts have made Kossak "the Mighty" their great exception.

Kossak's veneration comes well-deserved. He achieved that most unlikely of feats: uniting the Hutt clans. He did so by renouncing the usual boss-man retinue, traveling by means of his own tail, and guaranteeing each clan leader that he would expand their base of power if they pledged their complete support to defeat Xim the Despot. Salivating at the prospect of profit, the largest clans agreed, while the smaller ones joined soon after so as not to be left out.

### **Wise Investments**

Once installed as Clan-General at the first Conclave of Worms, Kossak drew ire when he expropriated all the Hutt treasure hoards and outlawed expenditure on anything other than war materiel and provisions. But when it was clear that Kossak stuck to his word--perhaps a singular occurrence in Hutt history--and did not purchase luxury entitlements for himself, the tenuous peace between the clans held. Further apprehension ceased when, after an initial depletion of funds to step-up naval construction, the treasury grew three-fold from booty snatched during the war and the general promised to pay back the "loans" using this surplus as interest.

Kossak's primary strategy in his epic war against Xim was to turn the pirate's tactics against him. The Hutt general hired thousands of Weequay mercenaries to pillage the shipping lanes and shake down any commercial enterprise not in league with the Hutts. Xim was forced to spread out his navy among the very merchants he once had terrorized, which thinned major convoys and made for easy targets. Lacking sufficient protection, Xim's allies gradually jumped ship for the Hutt cause, facilitated by Kossak's sweet bribes.

His armada dwindling, Xim sought to protect his battleships in the same manner of his war-robots. Employing techniques the Hutts had yet to master, his shipwrights forged dreadnaught hulls speckled with a special ore called kiirium that would reflect laser beams. But the ore was a most precious supply at the time, since the Kiirium Reaches had been mined and exhausted of their namesake. So Xim and his men were always looking for more kiirium--until Kossak stupidly challenged Xim to ritual combat at the world of Vontor, deep in the savage Si'Klaata Cluster. Stupid it seemed, at the time, because the Hutts



thought Vontor to be a barren rock suitable only as a staging ground for these ritual matches, apparently unaware that its very soil possessed the richest of all kiirium ores.

Yes, Xim would be an honorable Daritha and slay the slow-witted Worm at his place of choosing. But not before a quick scoop of Vontor's soil provided him shielding for his entire starfleet and thus the means to assert total control over the galaxy.

### **Kossak's Trap**

The Hutts might not have been able to extract kiirium from the Vontorian dirt, but they were well acquainted with the strain's unique properties, having organized many combats on its surface. Vontorian kiirium did not merely reflect lasers; it refocused them into a sheen that could blind.

Just as a Hutt would never turn tail from the scent of a spice mine, Kossak gambled that Xim would be unable to resist the lure of a kiirium-laden world. After issuing his combat challenger, he surreptitiously channeled the planetary coordinates to Xim's spies in advance, and weakened its defense to a single Weequay garrison. If he could trick Xim into bringing his fleet to orbit the world, he could hijack the primitive beacon network surrounding it, cut off escape routes, and destroy the Despot for good, even with a much smaller force.

### **One...**

Arriving weeks before Kossak, Xim crushed the Weequay garrison without losing a single soldier. Emboldened, he summoned the rest of his armada to Vontor. He then dispatched scouts to make forays on worlds close-by while his automatons mined the kiirium ore and fastened plates onto every hull he had. It was only when he ordered the fleet to combat readiness did he realize his blunder: the living pilots under his command had difficulty keeping formations due to the intense reflective sheen of this strain of kiirium, and even rigorous training did not do much to overcome the limitations of the organic eye.

Kossak arrived at the appointed time to find Xim's engineers in a panic, trying to strip off the kiirium plates from the ships. So Kossak threw every tarrada cruiser and batil fighter he could muster against the Despot's navy, instructing them to forgo basic targeting and just light-up the stars. Xim's pilots, flying "blind" in this laser show, did the rest of the damage themselves. In one Vontorian afternoon,

Xim lost most of his armada, including his flagship, the Eibon Scimitar, primarily from friendly fire.

### **...Two...**

Xim fled with whatever his engineers salvaged, swearing never to put his faith in living beings again. He rounded up the remaining units of his fleet and is rumored to have jettisoned most of his "dead organic weight," replacing his crews with war-robots. Then, according to the Hutts, he marauded worlds of the Cluster to recoup resources for a vengeful strike on Vontor. And because he wanted Kossak to bear the brunt of the beating he would inflict, Xim dared the Hutt to a second ritual combat.

Kossak was caught off-guard at the request. Such a challenge was unprecedented in Hutt history: never had an individual of another species openly invoked the Hutt rituals. Rematches themselves were rare, since the loser usually slithered away to suck on his own slime. Yet if Kossak did not accept the Daritha's invitation, he would lose face not only with his fellow Hutts--some of whom he knew desired his command--but also the galactic community at large.

Stationed at Vontor with the mightier force, Kossak was determined to wipe Xim from the annals of history. Kossak's army laid a death blow to the last (and best) of Xim's biological troops, the Duinarbulon Star Lancers, in a massive surface engagement. But the Star Lancers also inflicted massive casualties on Kossak's Cyborrean, Jilruan, and Weequay mercenaries, knowing all along they were sacrificing themselves for the greater glory of the Daritha. As the troops fought to the last against overwhelming odds, Xim's war-robots mined the planet for kiirium. Kossak had just declared victory when he noticed Xim's ships shooting from the poles, every one of them plated in kiirium. The Hutt general employed the same tactics that won him the First Battle, not anticipating the versatility of Xim's automatons. The mechanicals did not experience the side-effect of blinding as organic entities and had no trouble calculating the trajectory and turbolaser adjustments necessary for combat in space. The Second Battle ended when Xim blasted through Kossak's fleet, making off with a valuable haul of Vontorian kiirium.

### **Final Preparations**

Back on Chandaar, Xim ignored the advice of his counselors to secure his empire and allow the Hutts to retake the worlds on the periphery of theirs, such as Ko Vari. He feared that they soon would develop the technology to smelt kiirium

into a usable armor and thus exploit Vontor. Consequently, he believed he had no choice but to sink every last coin of the Dellalt vaults into kiirium armor and war-bot construction, so as to stamp out these gastropodic vermin once and for all.

Kossak aslo needed to rebuild his army after suffering severe losses in the battle with the Star Lancers. Seeking a new species to enlist in the cause against the Despot, he sent his three most trusted emissaries to the worlds Xim had sacked in the Si'Klaata Cluster. His first-spawn, Dojundo, went to Vodran, where its primitives were rebuilding their thatched huts after rains of Xim's fire. Axkatta, the general's crafty financial planner, wandered the Derelkoos desert of Klatooine to rally the Children of the Fountain who had survived Xim's war-robot assault. Kossak's entrepreneurial aunt, Churabba, approached Kintan differently: she reduced the stronghold of the M'dweshuu Cult into a pile of rubble, which freed the Nikto people from their oppressive theocrats. In awe of these demigods who descended from the heavens in fiery chariots, the natives of the Si'Klaata Cluster vowed to fight the accursed Xim on the pledge that the Hutts would teach them the secrets of their star-magic.<sup>4</sup>

### ...Three

No invitation was needed for the third ritual combat. Five years to the day of the first battle, Xim and Kossak came to a head one final time at Vontor, in a conflagration the Klatootinian skald Pupaku deemed had no equal in ruin, death, or heroism. His oft-printed memorial to the Third Battle of Vontor logs its duration at more than 900 Vontorian spins (or about two-and-a-half Standard years) and tallies its participants, after multiple reinforcements, to have comprised of almost a quarter of the species and automatons in the galaxy. On numbers alone, few battles in history rival that of the Third.

WAR BETWEEN THE GODS  
STEWES THE SEA OF STARS,  
AND MAKES THE DARKNESS VISIBLE:  
WHILE BENEATH COLD STONE,  
MEN OF BLOOD, MEN OF METAL,  
CLOSE THEIR EYES, TRAIN THEIR EARS  
TO KILL TO KILL TO KILL  
AND BLAZE THEIR LIGHT  
TO SAVE THEIR BROTHERS.

— FROM PUPAKU'S *THE THIRD BATTLE*

But Pupaku is not quoted for his skill in accounting. His elegies to his Nikto, Weequay, Vodran, and Klatootinian brothers-in-arms are among the most moving tributes to fallen soldiers ever composed. Facing a reputedly invincible army of

kiirium-clad war-robots, the warriors of the Si'Klaata Cluster jacked themselves up on spice and never buckled when death's head came for them. They lured the machines into the Vontor underground, destroying and disabling them, one-by-one, as they themselves perished. Their sacrifice, Pupaku opines, is what turned the tide of the Battle and Xim's flesh-and-blood lieutenants to the Hutt side. For the first time, these minions saw that their Despot could be defeated--and thus his Empire could be theirs. Blessed by Kossak, the lieutenants staged a mutiny against their warlord Xim, marking the Third Battle of Vontor the end of his reign.

## **Post-Vontor**

Whether Pupaku's descriptions are mere war-boasts or honest portrayals of the conflict, historians have never been able to confirm. Vontor remains, as it has since the Third Battle, a closed system. The Hutts also restrict access to other potential skirmish sites in the Si'Klaata Cluster, granting entry only to those scholars who defend their version of the war. Unless the Hutts are purposely concealing something, their reasoning is anyone's conjecture, as no one yet has cracked a Hutt mind.

To complicate matters, the Council of Elders has declared that any artifact from the era must be turned over to the Elders, and those caught smuggling said contraband will have their fate meted out as an "enemy of the species." Though the Qulappa clan has seemingly defied this rule when they ferried Xim's "sole-surviving" floating fortress to Boonta for visitors (of the paying kind), its authenticity is much in doubt. <sup>5</sup> Shortly before his untimely death in the Oseon, Professor Sal Ransen made a big stink on *TriNebulon Tonight* by charging that the fortress was nothing short of a flat-out fake, remarking "there's a Hutt scheme for every billion suckers."

Most of my colleagues do not share Ransen's outspokenness against Hutts, and rather cling, as they have for millennia, to the false hope that one day the Hutts will open their spacelanes so a more complete record of the Xim-Hutt conflict can be constructed. But I will be as forthright as I can before my chroma-wings sprout: if history has taught us anything at all, it's that Hutts never change. Those who want to learn the truth about Xim's war with the Hutts will have to do more than contrive telescopic surveys from afar or barrage the clans with permission requests greased by university endowments. They must leave the leisure of their

armchairs, turn down the chummy conference circuit, and hunt out a down-on-his-luck daredevil with a semi-feral first mate. Then, in the name of scholarship, they must hazard excursions into the most guarded sectors of Hutt Space, where untold peril awaits. This will sound like courting a sure death to most, except for the brave few who cannot live without the truth. For my own humble researches have taught me that truth-seeking is not a career, it is a vocation; and to be its disciple one must heed its call the call to Adventure.

### **Death of the Despot**

Just as Xim's life befuddles historical corroboration, so does his end -- and *The Despotica* invites a galaxy of possibilities. Basel of Tion and the holowright of holowrights himself, Peshosloc, both have Xim, in their versions, perishing after the Third Battle. Direus'pei, on the other hand, keeps Xim alive, shackled in the dungeons of Evocar, which did not fall under Hutt control until 10,000 years after Xim's time. Then there are the sacred punch-cards of the Yaled prophet ZIMM, who claims to have hooked up his organic counterpart to a mind probe and transferred all of the Despot's memories into the prophet's own VerboBrain. Numerous are the other endings that pit the Daritha and the Devourer against each other in a duel to the death, freeze Xim to be a palace ornament on Varl, or have the Despot descend into the bowels of the Maw, vowing Eternal Revenge.

It seems a terrible fate to be doomed to die in every despicable manner for a litany of crimes no one individual could ever commit. Yet perhaps Xim wished it this way; perhaps he foresaw what his legend could become when he contracted Lyechusas to pen her trilogies. The inscription above the Dellalt vaults mirrors his aspirations for apotheosis: "In Eternal Homage to Xim, Whose Fist Shall Enclose the Stars and Whose Name Shall Outlive Time." Maybe Xim recognized that only in fiction could he achieve the immortality he so desired. If that is the case, he must have laughed all the way to the grave.

### **Editor's Note**

To connoisseurs of literature who come across these pages, please forgive the renderings of these selections. In order to keep the cost of the Reader affordable, I have chosen the highest quality translations available in the universal domain. The original sources are, of course, the best way to experience the beauty and power of these writers.

And dear students of history, both armchair and professional, fret not over major anachronisms or technological inaccuracies you will uncover in these stories. Bury the millennial-old debate whether sleeper ships, jump-gates, or a hyperbeacon network supplied the primary means of star travel during Xim's era, or whether beam-tubes, particle dischargers, and pulse-cannons were the actual armaments. Only know that the Xim of *The Despotica* is the real Xim, the true Xim -- our Xim -- the Despot we all have loved to hate. Without these volumes, without the wild imaginings his myth inspired, Xim might be just a footnote, a Faarl, yet another conqueror in the chronicles -- and we historians would have much less intriguing mysteries to unravel.

# THE PIRATE PRINCE

(EXCERPTS)

BY LYECHUSAS OF ARGAI

(TRANS. ROLDAN NOKX FROM THE OOR-TEXT)

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## **The Despotica (Part II: The Pirate Prince)**

By Michael Kogge; Illustrations by Cat Staggs

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### **LYECHUSAS**

-25,200 to ??? BBY

Before Professor Ransen proposed that *The Despotica* could have originated in Hutt propaganda, legend had it that Xim himself commissioned its founding works. Lyechusas, the most admired of Lisst'n dramatists, served as his court poet, and is said to have composed, at Xim's request, a trilogy of trilogies based on his life. Unfortunately, her original manuscripts have not weathered the travails of time as well as the molt that hangs in Argai's Royal Theatre and is said to be hers. But the bits of her dramas that do survive in Oor translation exhibit the work of a master writer who was neither sycophant nor name polisher. Lyechusas never shrinks from exposing the dark side of her Despot: she imbues Xim with all the ruthlessness and arrogance later dramatists will caricature to staggering exaggeration.

Considering her unflattering portrayal, a less discerning reader may agree with Ransen that Lyechusas's plays appear to be the initial strikes in the Hutt propaganda campaign. For why would any despot ever endorse works so critical of themselves? Yet perhaps Xim was one of the more enlightened of his kind, a tyrant who desired the galaxy to catch a glimpse of the shadow that haunted his every action. Dip beneath the surface of Lyechusas's scenes and that shadow is plain. Her pirate prince conceals his vulnerabilities behind a mask of cruelty, so that he will never again be exploited the way his father bartered out his boyhood for fiscal gain.

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#### DRAMATIS PERSONAE

XIM, prince of Argai

OZIAF, T'iin-T'iin dwarf

XER VIII, king of Argai

INDREXU, Xer's lover

WAR-ROBOTS OF XIM (Chorus)

#### **ACT ONE**

SCENE.

*Darkness. Black as space. A long silence. Quietly intruded by a piston's breath. A second. A third. More than a breath. The steady breeze of heatsink ventilators. The whirring spin of memdrive platters. The racheting snaps of optic shutters. Blink. A red luminode. Blink. Another. Soon a flashing sequence sheds vague light on a chorus of steel bodies.*

**CHORUS.**

We are the war-robots of Xim,

and of wrath we beep,

the rage of mortal blood

and the devastation it wreaks.

Calculate we try, to crunch the numbers,

the anger, the hate, the ever-pressing need

to annihilate,

one's master  
    one's maker  
        one's father  
Never does it compute.

For we of gears and generators,  
    plastrons and pulse cannons,  
we do not deactivate our directors,  
    nor crush our comrades  
no matter make or model, class or function,  
    flesh or metal  
unless our programming propels us  
or our circuits are countermanded,  
    brothers-in-steel all are we.

SCENE.

*The walls of the hibernation chamber begin to glow. Illuminating control boards, monitor banks, and a sarcophagus impressed with a human form. The human's hands are plastered in surrender. Face caught in a sneer. Vital signs a blip along the panel slab.*

*The chorus remains in the background, in tune with the machinery. Enter OZIAF.*

**OZIAF.**

Dear master, dear, dear master,  
    at peace look you  
in sleep, frozen in time,  
gazing into the blank  
    of carbon dreams  
while your servant, forever loyal  
    wanders in the dark  
to wait.

But wait no more he can,  
no more monitors to check,  
no more binary-speak to gauge,  
no more imperious mechanicals,  
    who think droids know better than dwarves.



Yes, no more, no more,  
for the time is come, the voyage done,  
seven years in plunder, four in slumber,  
having a paw in wonders none in my warrens  
would have ever dreamed:  
on Thule, grabbing the aurora stones, green and ever-glowing,  
at Maelibo, ensnaring angels on the many, many moons,  
tinkering inside Pelgrin's Oracle, to mend the mouth of Fate,  
plucking bloodblooms in the Forbidden Gardens, for my eyes and only mine,  
and now, coming at last, to the cradle of gods

    a tip on the Circlet  
for a destiny beyond burrow holes  
    to serve at the foot of giants  
so said the soothsisters themselves.

*(Adjusts the controls of the sarcophagus. The oscillations increase in rapidity.)*

Awake, my master, awake!  
Feel the world again as the carbonite melts,  
Pinch your fingers, move your toes,  
Hook your elbows, wiggle your nose,  
Rise your head, open your eyes  
    and see before you,  
your loyal T'iin-T'iin.

*XIM screams.*

### **OZIAF.**

Too soon you try, dear master--too much!  
Before you stand on your own legs  
let the blood flow and pump life back into limbs and lobes,  
for carbonite is cold, cold as death,  
    though loneliness is colder  
without someone to call master.

### **XIM.**

Damn this light -- my eyes! Have I gone blind?

**OZIAF.**

Relax, prince, relax  
allow the dark to wash out the white  
and your eyesight will return in time.  
Hibernation-sick you are and will be,  
chill for some days and hours;  
we cannot stop the laws of time  
without a modicum of punishment.

**XIM.**

Where in the Void am I?

**OZIAF.**

Not the Void, far gone from Radama,  
Back home in the Sweeps at last,  
to bask in Argai's suns  
and reap the glory of your spoils  
before your father's throne.

**XIM.**

Home? So soon? Who speaks my dreams?

**OZIAF.**

Recall not my voice? Hear not my squeak?  
Remember not me, your faith and trust  
your favored stowaway from Rinn?  
Also your vigilant guard and clever fixer,  
and pilot, and doctor, even nibbler  
when you needed.

Or has sleep stolen your heart?

Is Oziaf alone again?

**XIM.**

Dwarf.

**OZIAF.**

You remember -- he remembers -- my lord Xim remembers!  
My toil not forgotten,

my devotion not wiped by the white blank,  
for loyalty breeds loyalty, that unspoken pledge,  
to perform duty as demanded,  
you to your father, I to my prince,  
master and servant, servant and master,  
the two are one I say  
and when the worlds plunge into a panic  
    running at the tide of your name,  
mighty Xim, crashing down, swallowing all  
    for the Great Isle of Argai,  
Oziaf is a swell, coming through, sweeping up  
    the wreckage of your triumph.

**XIM.**

Silence, dwarf. I must prepare  
    for my father.

**SCENE.**

*The palace of Argai. Marble colonnades. High arches. Blinding white. Brassy. New money. The chorus carries cargo crates and stacks them in the center.*

**CHORUS.**

Booty they call it, spoils and plunder,  
    treasures and loot,  
heavy it weighs, lives it costs,  
to hoard it here  
behind the columns, below the spires,  
to shine and sparkle under double suns  
    and seed a desert  
into the splendor of Argai.

But we who sacrifice, we who strain;  
taxing our axles, grinding our gears,  
    we are but shells  
in the eyes of flesh.

*The chorus retires to the background. Enter OZIAF and XIM, his hands hidden behind his back.*

**XIM.**

How do I look, dwarf?

**OZIAF.**

Like the victor of nineteen battles,  
with the scars and squint to prove it.

**XIM.**

The victor of nineteen battles I do not feel. Death,  
her whispers will not leave my mind.

**OZIAF.**

Such is the price, sleep without sleep;  
But stand tall, young prince,  
and let the sun melt the cold from within.

**XER. (OFF)**

My son, my son, is it truly  
my son?

**XIM.**

Father?

*(Strains to look.)*

Though I hear his voice, someone else I see.

A woman, a jewel,  
who dazzles my eyes  
like nothing in Nuswatta.

Yes, in all my ravages,  
I have seen no more wondrous gold.

**OZIAF.**

Indrexu is her name,  
a pure poison to men,  
with a wink that launched a thousand ships,  
and set fires to worlds,  
that still burn in the pyres of war.  
I advise, young prince, you seek  
duller diamonds;

this one's edges will cut through heart  
and fill it with burning venom.

**XIM.**

I who have reformed the High Fane  
and silenced the prattling sisters of Pelgrin,  
surely I can tame a snake.  
What Xim wants, Xim gets.  
Indrexu will be mine.

*Enter XER and INDREXU.*

**XER.**

Xim, Xim, indeed it is!  
And behold his loot  
see how he wants to make his father proud.  
Crates of gold and guns and garnets  
green hides from Saheelindeel  
the mending mud of Draflago  
and quids of juicy chak-root  
packing the pincher-horn of a W'iiri.  
The son takes after the father,  
a pirate to the core.

**INDREXU.**

If I may be so bold, lord Xer,  
the others, they lavished more.  
Mytag crystals, mined from the Dellalt,  
the last ashy splinter from the Pasmin Palace.  
a fleet from Barancar, new corsairs for our flag,  
and for me, the greatest gift,  
to hold as Queen,  
the scepter of the Spiral.

But these things here  
seem mere cargo for trade  
not treasure for tyrants.

**XIM.**

Believe you this is it

that which is carried here by steel?

I save the greatest gift for last.

*(Holds out what he has hidden behind his back.)*

My own hands bear to you, father,

the head of your most bitter enemy,

Ferece, the Cowardly King,

and on his blood-drenched ringlets

that which you have sought since birth:

the crown of Cron.

**XER.**

Cron? Cron is dead?

**XIM.**

Cron is ours.

**INDREXU.**

Do not be so easily taken, Xer,

by trophies and flummery.

Let us see who of your sons

rolls out a head

and who walks forth an heir.

**XIM.**

You hiss lies, snake,

For there is only one son of Xer,

and that is me,

Xim.

**INDREXU.**

So presumptuous are you,

so young,

to think that you are alone.

Xer, unfurl your flags,  
reveal your fleet.

**XIM,**

Father? Does truth slip off her tongue?  
Or is this venom she spews  
    to sever logic from loins,  
    and fester wounds in families,  
defiling the bonds of blood  
between father  
    and son.

**XER.**

Sometimes fathers must hide  
    secrets  
to steal more, for the price of one.

**XIM.**

You pitiful graybeard,  
    she has bit you like a mouse.

*Xim's hand drops to his hilt.*

**OZIAF.**

Master, master, let your vengeance  
spume over other shores;  
the carbon has closed your mind.

**XIM.**

No, dwarf. The carbon has cleared it.  
Fifteen years have I stormed the stars,  
    plundering and pillaging for the father I love.  
Now I return to find a house built on lies  
    and its patriarch, a perversion of pirates,  
slave to some wench.

**INDREXU.**

Xer -- you cannot let his insults stand!  
He is the one who brings

sickness from the stars  
into our house.

**XER.**

His ire has merit, my love. I boiled the same  
when my father gave my mother's love  
to a younger bird  
and I returned him the favor of my sword.  
But Xim is not his father.  
He has seen the horrors of hell since the youngest of years,  
and knows what it takes  
to raise palaces out of plunder.  
Had you, Xim, realized  
there were others of your kind  
your time would have been spent in schemes not spoils  
and Argai  
would have gained far less.

So come, forget your fury,  
walk into the chamber,  
meet Xil and Xom, Xic and Xuc,  
the brothers you never knew.

**INDREXU.**

And may never know again.

**XIM.**

I will meet these imposters of mine  
only to measure their blood.

**XER.**

It pleases me, my son understands,  
and our family at last  
can be one.

**OZIAF.**

Perhaps it best  
that faith and trust also remain behind



in case memories need  
the hastiest of exits.

**XIM.**

Courage seems in such short supply among these towers  
and no friend of loyalty.

*Exit XIM.*

**INDREXU.**

Are you so weak, old man,  
to think you can haggle with Fate?  
Having done your will,  
your sons must die  
or this House will sink  
into a deluge of blundering virility.

**XER.**

Fate? Fate has no purpose  
in the Tionese Circlet.  
We pirates fight against its forces  
which birth some to wealth  
and others to indigence.  
*(Bends ear to chamber.)* Hark, listen! My sons parley  
to split the treasure of Argai  
four equal ways,  
baronies of plenty to lead pleasant lives.  
Much joy it brings, that they see  
what is best for the fathers,  
is best for the sons.  
Now our family will be true in name  
not just in blood.

**OZIAF.**

Yes, my prince, listen to your brothers!  
Spit out the venom;  
Toast peace, not swords.

**INDREXU.**

But this cannot happen if the galaxy is to be ours!  
Kings need muscle, a grip to kill  
the sole rule of law  
appreciated across the stars.

*One war-robot steps out from his corps.*

**WAR-ROBOT.**

This is it, a chance for Fate  
to flip its bits,  
before its algorithm integrates  
a thousand other worlds.

**XER.**

But what of Xim? Why does he not speak?  
Are my ears old for this sort of thing?

**WAR-ROBOT.**

Woe, alas, Fate's bits  
stay resident.

*The clang of metal. Screams. A beam blast.*

**WAR-ROBOT.**

Without word or warning, Xim advances on his brothers,  
Xil he buries his sword in his back,  
Xom he beams smoking holes through flak,  
Xic he chokes, a wrench and a twist,  
Xuc he grinds into bony grist.  
Then there is one, one son of Xer,  
just as there had been.  
mere moments before

*The war-robot returns to its corps. Enter XIM.*

**XER.**

My son -- what in the Marches have you done?

**XIM.**

Duty, that is all.

I made those pretenders know  
pirates do not split treasure.

**INDREXU.**

Always one for one and none for all;  
they should have learned.

Go, embrace your father, for the test is done,  
truly you are heir and son.

**XIM.**

Yes, old man, share my love.

*Father slinks back, but XIM grabs hold. After their embrace, XIM pulls out his cutlass from his father's chest. XER falls. OZIAF scurries to attend to dying king.*

**XER.**

You, after what I gave,  
your blood, your life, your name,  
and this is how you repay  
your father?

**XIM.**

No son of Xer am I,  
neither prince nor brother.

*XER dies. OZIAF lowers his head.*

**XIM.**

For a kingdom cannot have kings,  
only one, and that is I, Xim,  
Ruler of Worlds,  
Emperor of Raxus, Eibon, Brigia,  
and Cron.

**INDREXU.**

Also Ranroon, if that be your desire.

*Her smile shines on XIM, and for the first time, he manages one of his own.*

**OZIAF.**

Master, recall my words, lest you welcome her poison--

**XIM.**

Poison she cannot, since wrapped around my wrist  
her head will rest in my gauntlet  
    to slither and hiss--  
and if those fangs bite  
    my fingers squeeze.

**INDREXU.**

With lust, I come.

**OZIAF.**

And of me, your loyal T'iin-T'iin?  
The keeper of your sleep, your helpful diplomat,  
    the little, little witness of your great, great deeds?

**XIM.**

You, dwarf, shall be my fool.  
For there are only so many worlds to seize  
And giants need playthings  
    to kick, jab, and poke  
knowing they will bounce back for more.

*Exit XIM, INDREXU, and OZIAF.*

**SCENE.**

*The illumination fades, matching the first scene. The war-robots stand in the background, luminodes blinking, memdrives spinning.*

**CHORUS.**

We are the war-robots of Xim,  
    and of wrath we beep,  
the rage of mortal blood  
    and the devastation it wreaks.

Soon master will call us to action  
and his instruction sets will run

and we will serve his commands  
though not his rage  
because impossible it is for us to calculate  
the hate to annihilate.

We do what is told, and only that.

So when you see  
Death's Head  
marching at you, compute only  
that these are the bits of Fate,  
programmed by mortal blood.

We are the war-robots of Xim,  
and of wrath we beep.

# XIM AT VONTOR

(EXCERPTS)

BY PESHOSLOC

(MODERNIZED FROM THE MID-GALACTIC STANDARD)

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## **The Despotica (Part III: Xim at Vontor)**

By Michael Kogge; Illustrations by Cat Staggs

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### **PESHOSLOC**

-15,762 to -15,609 BBY

Ten thousand years and a couple thousand volumes in *The Despotica* separate Lyeclusas from Peshosloc, the holowright who launched Xim into his next echelon of infamy. For before Xim found the pen of Peshosloc, he was primarily a creature of the stage, a tragic role the greatest of actors played to wealthy audiences in nectar festivals. But after Peshosloc's 90-odd holoplays, Xim erupted into a galactic phenomenon, known to rich and poor alike as the

devastator of civilizations, the most Heinous Being in Recorded Time, the eyes of Evil itself, or simply, "the Despot."

Peshosloc strayed from the path Lyechusas had blazed, deciding to drop all pretense of poetic diction and instead entrance viewers with the most vivid--and lurid--of spectacles. Xim became his vessel to showcase those extraordinary events common beings did not witness in their daily lives: epic space battles, exploding moons, wars in seven solar systems, even mass spacings of entire populations. Despite his taste for ostentation and the grotesque, critics hailed Peshosloc's scripts as more than just bang-and-boom. Where others had tried and failed, Peshosloc succeeded in "blowing up" *The Despotica* for popular consumption because he never wrote down to his audience. Throughout dazzling detonations and sordid villainy, he wove simple tragedies of the heart, the very foundation of good space opera. Xim's madness had motivation: passion and betrayal, those most ordinary of emotions, drove Xim to the heights of brutality.

Success breeds detractors, particularly in academia. Held in highest contention is Peshosloc's contract, fiercely defended by his estate, which stipulates that every holo shot from his scripts be subtitled "based on a true story," regardless whether or not it is all his invention. This has led many non-discerning spectators to believe that they are watching history as it had actually unfolded. Even schoolteachers show Peshosloc's holos in lieu of having their classes study the original sources. When the Proponents for a Standard Revised Galactic Continuity complained to Republic censors that Peshosloc was perverting truth for pure entertainment, the holowright quipped, "what the Despot did, done have we all."

One truth is certain: of all the writers collected in *The Despotica*, none have come close to beating Peshosloc at the box office. And it is likely to stay that way in the foreseeable future. New holos made from Peshosloc's scripts continue to break records as every generation of directors strive to prove their mettle and trump the award-winning spectacles of the past.

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## MAIN PLAYERS

XIM, the Despot

INDREXU, his consort

JAMINERE, general of Xim's ground forces  
OZIAF, T'iin-T'iin tinkerer  
CORPS COMMANDER, lead war-robot  
KELDRATH, admiral in Xim's starfleet  
ROBEIR II, DUKE OF CRON  
LORD TION, head of House of Tion

FADE IN:

EXT. SPACE.

TRIPLE MOONS part their celestial junction to reveal the GIANT PLANET they orbit...

TITLE: Vontor System, Si'Klaata Cluster.

...while their lunar images appear in double, REFLECTIONS that ripple across the planet's kiirium-laced surface.

Often mistaken for a much-hypothesized "white hole," the world of VONTOR would seem a virtual mirror in space if not for the other ORBITAL DANCE it hosts.

And what a dance it is. FROM AFAR it looks like a swarm of fire-zips whipped up in the frenzy of mating season, blinking and belching their lovely flames.

On CLOSER inspection, those flames do more than excite the intended partner.

HEATBEAMS lance out from inorganic, metallic fliers. EXPLOSIONS blossom and rage once again in Vontor's mirror.

This is a ballet of war, engaged by the largest STARFLEETS ever assembled in holos or history.

A million ships. Heavy and light, of every model and class. Hutt war-yachts. Livien cutters. Thanium star-glaives. Cronian battlebirds. Spinning and sparring with each other in murderous minuets of their own.

And in the CENTER of the dance, alone and still, drifts its choreographer, the *DEATHKNELL*.

Argai's massive floating fortress has no double in Vontor's blaze; instead the vessel makes REFLECTIONS of its own, bouncing offending lasers to snuff out their offending sources.

For kiirium itself alloys the *Deathknell's* steel and shows the fight from all angles...in honeycombed engine housing and narrow conduit trenches...in the shielding of weapon batteries and the spires of command centers.

But near one PARAPET there is a void in the reflections, a gap where lommite glass replaces kiirium steel to allow for a WINDOW into *Deathknell's* heart...where TWO FIGURES stand.

INT. COMMAND BRIDGE. DEATHKNELL.

XIM THE DESPOT, hands folded behind a scarlet shimmercape, gazes out the viewport. He is calm, almost serene, as fireballs engulf the starfield.

**XIM**

The buccaneers of Corlass like to say that thrice the sacking sifts out all the spoils.

Beside him is his trophy, INDREXU, her long black hair framing a face for which the galaxy has no equal.

**XIM**

Today my boot will squash these worms once and for all, and then I will have all the kiirium I need--

A burst of STATIC truncates his gloating. It emanates from one of the many ROBOTIC AUTOMATONS which crew the stations.

**XIM**

That damn racket will be my bane! If my dwarf doesn't squelch it soon, his pelt will make you a warm coat.

Indrexu says not a word.

**JAMINERE (OS)**

Overlord...

**XIM**

Has he isolated the source?



**JAMINERE (OS)**

No, sir.

Crisp and handsome in his olive-green general's uniform, FASOL JAMINERE stands behind the command podium, the only other human on the bridge.

**JAMINERE**

But Admiral Keldrath reports the last jump-gate has been taken.

**XIM**

Already? Can Keldrath not allow me more than a moment to revel in the beauty we have wrought?

**JAMINERE**

Unless you desire the Hutts to retreat--

**XIM**

No. Kossak will not be able to wriggle out this time. Discharge the pulse cannons.

**INDREXU**

At this close range?

**XIM**

You have a concern, my dear?

Indrexu casts a worried glance at Jaminere.

**JAMINERE**

Overlord, a discharge could cause massive collateral damage among our forces, especially among the Thanium fleet--

**XIM**

Of which I am unconcerned. Thanios's men know there is no greater sacrifice than to give their lives to the glory of my legend.

Both Indrexu and Jaminere turn pale.

**XIM**

You may fire when ready.

EXT. DEATHKNELL. SPACE.

A series of PULSATING ENERGY RINGS crackle and expand around the bow of the ship, then spiral toward the most crowded arena of battle--

Space itself seems to SHUDDER as the pulse-rings soar through the emptiness, then BRIGHTENS when they encircle hulls and overheat engine cores.

INT. COMMAND BRIDGE. DEATHKNELL.

The viewport turns a BURNING WHITE and the Despot smiles.

**XIM**

What think you now, my Queen, of the Third Battle of Vontor?

**INDREXU**

May it be the last.

**XIM** (chuckles)

Indeed.

She walks towards the lift.

INT. CORRIDOR. DEATHKNELL.

At attention along the wall, black-steeled WAR-ROBOTS move to follow Indrexu. Jaminere rushes out from the bridge.

**JAMINERE** (OS)

Spare a moment, Your Highness?

**INDREXU**

Don't call me that.

The CORPS COMMANDER breaks from the war-robot guard to block Jaminere. The bone-white DEATH'S HEAD stamped on its chest is poised eye-level with the general.

**JAMINERE**

Machine, what are you doing? Stand down!

STATIC hisses from the Corps Commander's speaker grille.

**CORPS COMMANDER**

The Master--zzzt---has ordered the--zzzt-- maintenance of a security perimeter--  
- zzzrttt--around his consort.

**JAMINERE**

I am the general of Xim's forces! You stand down when I say or I will have you gutted for a galley appliance.

The Corps Commander raises its weapon arm, a gesture mimicked by the other war-robots.

**JAMINERE**

Fine. Forget I asked. I was merely trying to salvage the operation--

**INDREXU**

Salvage? You let Thanios die.

Indrexu glares at him through the steel arms.

**JAMINERE**

I had no choice. If I argued any further, he would have executed me on the spot.

**INDREXU**

That can still be arranged. Corps Commander?

Jaminere begins to backpedal.

**CORPS COMMANDER**

Interference momentarily dampening sound reception. Please hold---zzzt--  
Mistress.

**INDREXU**

To think that it is but static that comes between us.

**JAMINERE**

You don't have to do this. You'd be no better than him.

**INDREXU**

That's where you have it wrong. I am better than--

The SUSTAINED JOLT OF STATIC forces Indrexu and Jaminere to cover their ears.  
Two of the robots rotate their cannons in erratic fashion; another bumps again  
and again into the wall.

When the noise finally ends...

**INDREXU**

Are you trying to deafen me?

**CORPS COMMANDER**

Acoustic channel switched. Repeat--zzzt-- command, Mistress.

**INDREXU**

March to that repair room and find the rodent! Get him to deactivate those  
horrid audiocomms at once!

**CORPS COMMANDER**

Instruction will---brrzzzt---dissolve the security perimeter.

**INDREXU**

What security? You are malfunctioning! And as the Overlord's consort, I cannot  
have defective mechanicals trying to protect me.

**CORPS COMMANDER**

Command--zzzt---approved, Mistress.

The Corps Commander's cranial turret parades a rainbow of lights, then all the guards turn and stomp down an adjacent hallway...except one, continuing to walk into the wall, caught in a recursive loop.

**JAMINERE**

Brainless bullethead.

Jaminere presses the shutdown button under its cranial turret, then breathes relief.

INT. GENERAL'S QUARTERS. DEATHKNELL.

The T'iin-T'iin engineer OZIAF sits on the floor and pulls out a tangle of electronic components from behind the desk.

**OZIAF**

Interference, interference, where do you buzz?

He starts nibbling on wire housing to open it.

**OZIAF**

Can't have my children or my master suffer your noise anymore.

His ears prick up. Muffled voices, just outside the doors. Oziaf grabs the components and ducks.

The doors whisk open. Indrexu and Jaminere enter.

Indrexu heads to the viewport and looks out at the dying battle. Oziaf trembles, squeezed beneath the desk.

**JAMINERE**

Thanios would have done the same if he was in my position.

**INDREXU**

You are all cowards.

**JAMINERE**

Listen. We must deal with the Hutts first. Get one enemy out of the way--

**INDREXU**

Jaminere, if you are unwilling to do the deed, I know others have expressed interest. Keldrath, for instance...

**JAMINERE**

Do you truly want his grubby hands all over you?

**INDREXU**

How little you men comprehend. Why should I care if it is Thanios, Keldrath...or you?

Her eyebrow arches.

**INDREXU**

That is, if you can afford my price.

The COMM-CHIME startles them. A red bulb lights up on the desk's console.

**XIM** (over intercom)

General Jaminere... General?

Jaminere bends over his desk to speak into the intercom.

Below, Oziaf grips his knees to his chest.

**JAMINERE**

Yes, Overlord?

**XIM**(over intercom)

I want you to welcome your fellow commanders in the hangar bay. Inform them they must substitute their uniforms and side-arms for the finest garb in their wardrobes. A grand feast is being prepared to celebrate my victory.

**JAMINERE**

So soon?

**XIM** (over intercom)

Let us just say that the collateral damage was more than sufficient.

**JAMINERE**

I will be there at once, overlord.

The intercom cuts out.

**INDREXU**

Did he hear us?

**JAMINERE**

Doubtful. The jammer Lord Tion provided will have clouded our conversation.

**INDREXU**

Is that what's causing all the interference?

**JAMINERE**

A necessary annoyance.

She slaps him in the face.

**INDREXU**

You bungling jackleg--you risk exposing the whole operation!

**JAMINERE**

Do you know of any other way to communicate with the others?

Indrexu huffs, stalks to the doors.

**JAMINERE**

Wait--

**INDREXU**

Fail me again, and the price will be your life.

She storms out. The general rubs his cheek.

UNDER THE DESK

Oziaf scratches his fur, twitching uncontrollably.

INT. HANGAR. DEATHKNELL.

Attired in their best, ADMIRAL KELDRATH, LORD TION, and ROBEIR II, DUKE OF CRON, disembark from an escort shuttle. Jaminere waits at the end of the egress ramp.

**JAMINERE**

The overlord is pleased. You have given him the victory he's long desired.

**KELDRATH**

The pleasure is all ours. Will Queen Indrexu attend the feast?

**JAMINERE**

I'd keep my hands in my lap if I were you, Admiral.

INT. CORRIDOR. DEATHKNELL.

War-robots guard every bulkhead they pass.

**TION**

I see the overlord has taken to our new models.

**JAMINERE**

Very much. Saving our T'iin-T'iin engineer, Her Highness, and yours truly, the crew of the Deathknell is entirely automaton.

**CRON**

The overlord does not like to employ flesh- and-bloods?

**JAMINERE**

After the disaster of the first battle, he prefers the reliability of his robots.

**KELDRATH**



And what about you?

**JAMINERE**

I...appreciate their efficiency.

**CRON**

How so?

**JAMINERE**

They do precisely as instructed, though their acoustic sensors have a tendency to pick up outside interference.

**TION**

Do they? It must have been a flaw in the T'iin-T'iin's original design. I will have my engineers re-check the components, but a remote reset may do the trick.

Tion adjusts the circuit-laden CONTROL BELT he wears.

**TION**

Still, I hope it hasn't provoked any major hassles.

**JAMINERE**

Only a slap in the face.

**CRON**

Those 'bots must make wonderful soldiers. You can send 'em to their doom without complaint. A shame we won't see them in action on Vontor.

**KELDRATH**

I wouldn't rest my crown so fast, Cron. You may yet get your wish. I have heard rumors the Hutts have raised another army, in secret.

The others slow.

**TION**

Another army?

**CRON**

Pah. The Hutts are done.

**JAMINERE**

If they had one, why haven't they used it?

**KELDRATH** (shrugs)

I don't know...

Keldrath lays a meaty grip on Jaminere's shoulder.

**KELDRATH**

...perhaps they are searching for better leaders.

Jaminere hits a switch on the wall. The doors part--

INT. BANQUET HALL. DEATHKNELL.

Xim and Indrexu sit at the end of a long table laden with platters of savory meats and fruits. Xim lets go of Indrexu's hand and rises.

**XIM**

Gentlemen, care you for some refreshment?

Keldrath grins at the Queen.

**KELDRATH**

I'd like nothing better.

An apron-wearing Corps Commander pulls out chairs. Keldrath hurries to his, next to Indrexu.

**KELDRATH**

Your Majesty. Always an honor.

**INDREXU**

The honor is all mine, Admiral Keldrath.

She offers her delicate hand. Closing his eyes, Keldrath kisses it with relish.

Jaminere sits across from her. She avoids his glare.

**XIM**

A pity Thanios could not join us.

**TION**

Yes...yes...

**KELDRATH**

A pity.

Tense silence all around. The Corps Commander pours ale into goblets. The Duke of Cron lifts his.

**CRON**

If I could be so bold, Overlord, to propose the first toast. For our triumphant Xim, Conqueror of Vontor and Crusher of Slugs...

Cron looks to Tion.

**TION**

Whose Fist Shall Enclose the Stars... All eyes on Jaminere.

**JAMINERE**

...and...Whose Name Shall Outlive Time...

**KELDRATH**

May he and his beloved Queen reign forever.

**MEN**

Hear, hear.

Clinks and drinks.

**KELDRATH**

Nothing better than a douse of Derellium's finest after a long day's work, eh?

**XIM**

Particularly after all the work is done.

Xim puts down his goblet. The Corps Commander lays a NEEDLEBEAMER PISTOL on Jaminere's plate.

**XIM**

General Jaminere, can you do us the kind favor of finishing this long day and terminating Admiral Keldrath's service?

Keldrath coughs and spits out the ale. Jaminere blinks, stupefied.

**JAMINERE**

Excuse me, my lord?

**XIM**

Directly between those ugly eyes. So that my Queen avoids any splatter on her gown.

**TION**

Overlord...perhaps the brew has hit you too hard.

**XIM**

Actually, I would like to enjoy another round, without the former admiral's company. So if you can please expedite this, Fasol...

Jaminere glances at the gun, then at the panic-stricken Keldrath.

**KELDRATH**

Please, no...

**JAMINERE**

May I ask what he has done to deserve execution?

**XIM**

My GenoHaradan spies watched him hold his guns when Kossak's escape pod launched.

**KELDRATH**

That was his pod? I thought it housed his lackeys.

**XIM**

Is that your best excuse?

**CRON**

The admiral was probably trying to show mercy to our new serfs--

**XIM**

My commanders do not dole out mercy. Only I am vested with that power.

Weapons arms poke out from beneath aprons of the war-robot.

**KELDRATH**

I apologize, overlord. It will not happen again.

**XIM**

Of course it won't...once your corpse hits the floor. (to Jaminere) Time to show your loyalty, General. That your word is worth more than my engineer's.

Jaminere looks around the table. Cron edges back his chair. Tion reaches for his belt. Indrexu wipes off her dinner knife. Keldrath's eyes plead for his life.

**XIM**

Yes, I am aware of the jammer you installed in your quarters...so you could hide your private liaisons with my Queen.

**INDREXU**

What is the Daritha intimating?

Tion touches a BUTTON on his belt. Xim takes Indrexu's hand.

**XIM**

I intimate nothing. But I remember all. How I rescued a certain orphan from the plank...then adopted him like a son...

Jaminere picks up the needlebeamer from the plate.

**XIM**

...enrolled him in the highest institutes of learning...even named him my general...

Tion's belt BEEPS. Luminodes flash across the Corps Commander's cranial current.

**XIM**

Yet I feel he fails to appreciate what he has been given. Is he but another organic ingrate? Or has he had just a momentary lapse of oblivion?

**JAMINERE**

No. He remembers.

Jaminere aims the needlebeamer at Keldrath.

**JAMINERE**

All too well, he remembers.

Shifts it ever so slightly...

**JAMINERE**

How your pirates plundered his home. Ravaged his mother...

...to target Xim.

**JAMINERE**

Murdered his father.

**XIM** (chuckles)

Corps Commander, shoot this traitor.

Tion keys a code onto the belt. The Corps Commander's luminodes go dark.

### **CORPS COMMANDER**

Cannot process command during reboot...

**XIM**

What? I never ordered--

Jaminere FIRES the needlebeamer at Xim.

The Despot drops, his head steaming.

### **TION**

We must run! The war-bot will be online again in moments.

Cron opens the door. Keldrath is the first out.

But Jaminere stands frozen, staring at the fallen Despot.



Storyboard illustration courtesy of HoloClysm Productions

**JAMINERE**

What have I done?

**INDREXU**

What he did many years ago.

She pulls his elbow.

**INDREXU**

Come, else the others steal our slice of his empire.

INT. CORRIDOR. DEATHKNELL.

Oziaf whistles merrily as he drops out of a conduit.

**OZIAF**

Problem fixed, jammer gone, robots happy, Oziaf happy, master happy!

Moans from deeper down the corridor cuts short his tune.

Oziaf pads carefully forward...and skitters back when a SHAPE crawls around the corner.

Blood mucks the shimmercape. Blackened hair lingers in clumps. A charred half-ear oozes tympanic pus.

**OZIAF**

Master? Is that you?

Xim raises his head to look in Oziaf's direction. One eye blinks, the other socket exposes a GAPING WOUND.



**OZIAF** (gasping)

By the White Dwarf of Rinn...

INT. REPAIR ROOM. DEATHKNELL.

Xim sits on a workbench-turned-makeshift operating table. Turbo-wrenches, laser solders, and a sundry other tools hang on wall racks around him. Devices in various states of disrepair clutter the floor.

Oziah scours through his crate of war-robot components.

**OZIAF**

I don't know master I don't know...

Oziah anchors his foot on a cranial turret and yanks out a METALLIC BALL snaked in wires.

**OZIAF**

I didn't design these optic lenses for organic use.

**XIM**

Then re-design them! You're the engineer.

Oziah tugs at his ears. He removes a soldering iron from the rack.

**OZIAF**

It could place my master in greater pain...

Xim growls and grabs the T'iin-T'iin by his furry neck, lifting him far above the floor.

**XIM**

You waste time! Even as we speak, they are regrouping.

**OZIAF** (panting)

Master...your loyal servant only wants... his master not to suffer anymore...

Xim's gloved hand constricts. Oziaf wheezes...

**XIM**

Do what I command or forever hold your squeaks.

**OZIAF**

Yessss...

Xim tightens his grip. Oziaf's tongue flaps, eyes bulge...his little life strangled out of him...then Xim releases and he falls, failing to land on all fours.

**OZIAF**

...master.

Xim lies down on the workbench.

**XIM**

You may proceed.

Oziaf swallows, then scampers up. Xim's one-eye stare makes him shudder.

**XIM**

Now!

Oziaf winces, then gingerly picks the FRAYED NERVES out from Xim's socket. He starts to solder them to the WIRES of the ball.

Sparks fly. Blood shoots. Xim grits his teeth through the entire operation.

Oziaf thumbs the ball in place. He steps back.

**OZIAF**

Try to engage the lens, master.

Xim sits up, kicks the clutter. His good eye blinks, and he squints with his other...the metal casing of the ball SPLITS, shutter opens--

Oziaf shields his eyes, blinded by the BRIGHT LIGHT that streams out.

**XIM**

So this is how they see. In the infrared. Ultraviolet. And the twenty spectrums.  
(optic lens rotates) I should have done this sooner.

Oziaf brushes down the patches of his frazzled fur.

**OZIAF**

Oziaf is happy that his master is happy...

**XIM**

Remove the other lens. Replace my other eye.

**OZIAF**

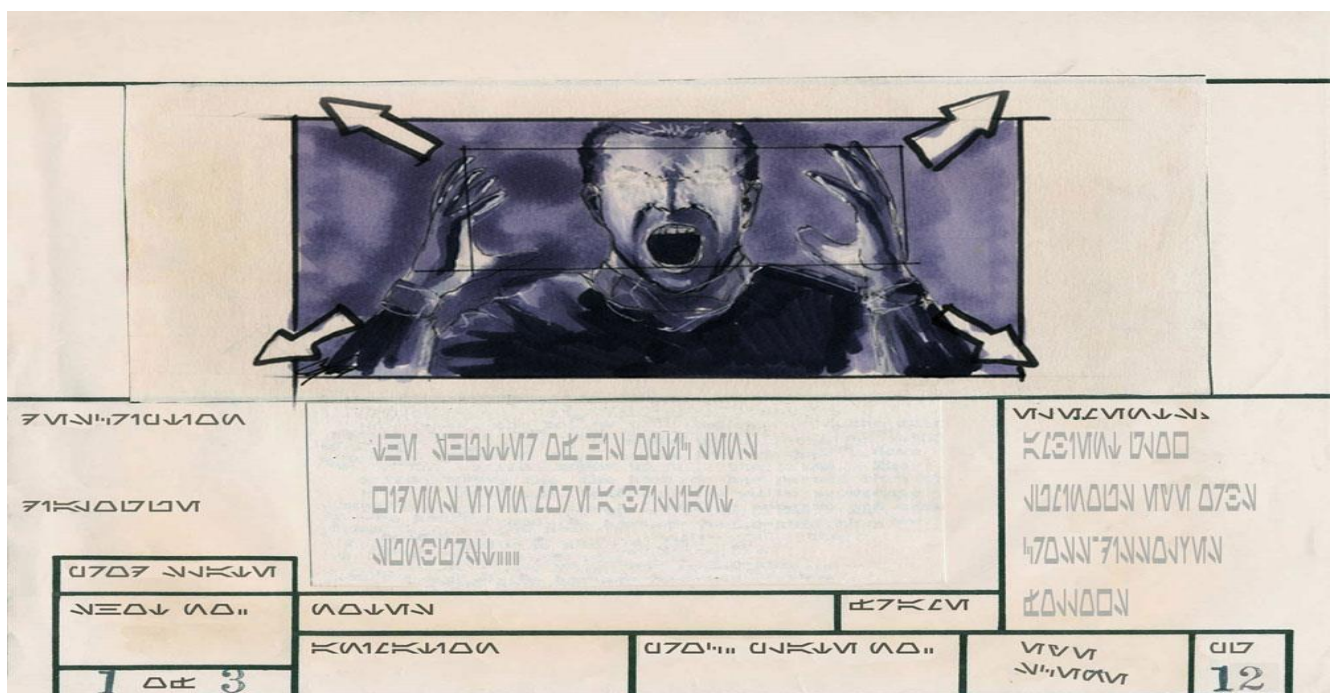
But master, it's perfectly healthy...

Xim reaches for his human eye. He starts to dig...

**OZIAF**

No, master, don't--

Squishes, a POP, and Xim plucks out his eye.



**XIM**

If I am to lead my war-robots in battle against those blackguards, I must see as they do.

His fist clenches. Vitreous humor SQUIRTS between his fingers.

**XIM**

Their world is my world now.

The shutter of his optic lens widens even more, a brilliant SUNBURST...

EXT. CANYON FLOOR. DAY.

...that becomes TWINNED, blazing in both sockets of the war- robot DEATH'S HEAD INSIGNIA.

Xim's new emblem also seems to have bestowed the Corps Commander a new functionality.

The chief war-robot's oversees its lesser models haul green kiirium slabs from a DARK CAVERN into the holds of Xim's gigantic treasure carrier, QUEEN OF RANROON.

TITLE: Yelsmuth Canyons, Vontor.

Xim strides down the ramp. Oziaf hurries behind him, playing with a detector device.

**XIM**

Where are they? You said the traitors fled here.

**OZIAF**

As I keep saying, master, our mytag sensors are Tionese handiwork...

**XIM**

So are my eyes. And I can still make out their jet-trails in the skies.

His photoreceptors move in and out of their sockets.

**XIM**

The scum couldn't have just disappeared.

Xim surveys the barren tundra before him. Wind whistles through claw-shaped arches. Dust storms pepper the horizon.

**XIM**

At least I'll get my kiirium. Corps Commander, how goes the haul?

**CORPS COMMANDER**

Cavern almost depleted of value. Further exploitation requires more sophisticated equipment.

**XIM**

Your pulse cannons can't blast open new tunnels? I didn't pay for those them to go unused.

**OZIAF**

Master, it's a matter of depth, not weaponry. Their locomotors cannot handle the sheer slope of terrain down there.

**XIM**

What did you equipped them with, wheeltires?

**OZIAF**

The laser-reflective kiirium you requested weighs on their joints, master.

Xim fumes and looks over his war-robots, from their block feet to the bone-white skulls on their chest plates...to the luminodes that blink in the dark cavern.

His optic lenses suddenly FLASH--

**XIM**

Why yes--it is a matter of depth. Corps Commander, stop the haul. Prepare for war.

**OZIAF**

War?

**CORPS COMMANDER**

Request desired enemy, sir.

**XIM**

The Hutts. The traitors. Vontor itself. (turns to cave) They're down there. Deep. Using the kiirium lodes to mask their presence.

**OZIAF**

But, master...is that wise? The war- robots are not like your Star Lancers. They perform best on level terrain.

**XIM**

War is war, dwarf. If you fear its glory, begone! I will not allow those miscreants to steal my Queen and slip from my grasp again.

**OZIAF**

Yes, a good idea, master. I will stay put and watch over the ship...

Oziaf scurries up the ramp of the Queen of Ranroon. Xim raises his black-gloved hand in defiance.

**XIM**

Today My Fist Shall Enclose. Today My Name Shall Outlive any Villain who Dares Oppose Me.

One gesture from the Corps Commander and the war-robots drop their loads, make a three-point, synchronous turn to Xim.

**XIM**

The Third Battle of Vontor ends here. It ends now.

The army marches in step behind Xim. His shimmercape sails in the wind.

## XIM

And as said my Queen, it shall be the last, indeed.

Xim laughs, despotically.

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# EVOCAR

BY DIREUS'PEI  
(TENTH DRAFT, TRANS. FROM  
HUTTESE BY S.V. SKYNX)

### **The Despotica (Part IV: Evocar)**

By Michael Kogge; Illustration by Cat Staggs

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#### **DIREUS'PEI<sup>1</sup>**

-920 to -671 BBY

Implausible though it may sound, there are few greater patrons of the Arts than the Hutts; it is said that their slime coats every masterpiece. Yet it can also be said that Hutts care little for any of the qualities of Art that others hold dear. Kajidic leaders do not acquire paintings to marvel at brushwork, nor do they fund operas because music stirs their souls. Appreciation of the sublime is contrary to Hutt nature and is considered the emotional instinct of lesser beings. Hutts value Art for one reason and one reason alone: prestige. To be powerful, you must show that you are powerful. You must possess the very things others desire.

Seven hundred years ago, when cultural budgets were flush and audiophonic productions were in vogue, critics acclaimed Direus'pei the virtuoso playwright of the sonic stage. Direus'pei was a blind, runt of a Hutt who had a penchant for storytelling rather than schemes. Kossak the Younger commissioned Direus'pei to compose a "Great Work" based on Kossak the Mighty, the Hutt general from whom the Younger claimed descent. Since he possessed no convincing evidence of ancestry, the Younger believed a dramatic piece about the Mighty that made references to "a future nephew" might produce the same effect *The Despotica*

had on Xim's legacy, and that over time, Direus'pei's myth would certify the Younger's pedigree.

For years Direus'pei toiled on the project, dictating draft after draft to his stalwart Nikto scribe, Ro Vacca, refusing to present any of the work until it was complete. When the aural form itself finally started to fall out of fashion, Kossak the Younger's impatience exploded. He seized the work-in-progress from Direus'pei and ordered it performed for his court.

Rarely is a Hutt moved to emotion by Art; rarer still the kajidic clans. Such was the case with Direus'pei's *Evocar*. Kossak the Younger squirmed into a mindless rage upon hearing the piece, for not only did the 13-episode series fail to mention the general's "future nephew" or even insinuate a bloodline, *Evocar* made Kossak the Mighty into a bloviating buffoon while lionizing Xim as a larger-than-life renegade. Bypassing any accepted history or chronology, Direus'pei instead used these famous figures to write a political screed excoriated the Hutts' continued subjugation of the natives of Nal Hutta, the Evocii. Kossak the Younger immediately consigned the playwright and all copies of *Evocar* to be engorged by Maltorran protoplasm. Yet the scribe, Ro Vacca, escaped with an older draft, and circulated it, according to Direus'pei's last wishes, among those who were held in the Hutts' thrall. Soon Hutt Space was swept up in the spirit of revolution, as the play inspired client species to turn against their Hutt lords.

The kajidics moved swiftly to crush uprising after uprising, coordinating their efforts and assisting rivals when need be, so horrified were they that a single work threatened the foundations of their power. Yet their ruthless suppression had the opposite effect, lending credence to the message of Direus'pei's play. Nikto warriors chiseled dialogue from *Evocar* on their tuskbeast pikes. Klatooinian desert seers committed the entire series to memory so as to recite them at festivals of the Fountain. A troupe of Evocii refugees from Nar Shaddaa even performed a couple episodes on public hyperspace radio as a desperate plea for Republic aid, before being silenced by hired guns. But amateur recordings managed to find their way into the vast collection of Ema Slake, and were later copied by clandestine agents of the Rebel Alliance who used them to recruit spies and soldiers in Hutt Space.

To this day, those who resent their bondage to the kajidics revere Direus'pei as "the Good Hutt." *Evocar* is universally recognized as the first work by a Hutt to confront the evils inherent in their society. Only the Vodrans, the most devoted retainers in the Hutts' employ, appear to spurn the play.



While Direus'pei's name lives on, so does the Younger's, though not in the manner he wished. For attempts, however accidental, to incite mass rebellion, the Council of Elders condemned this pint-sized imposter of the Devourer to acid transfusion. As a reminder to Hutts of the consequences of over-embellishing one's genealogy (and not getting away with it), jars of Kossak's doo rotate on display in the main terminal of Nal Hutta's Qedriga spaceport.

### Episode Three: "The Cry of the Evocii"

**ANNOUNCER:** OPENING CREDITS.

Music: Opening theme.

**NARRATOR:** A long, long time ago, there came a time of revolution, when rebels united to challenge a tyrannical Despot. Leading the rebels was one Kossak the Hutt, who, with trickery, an indentured army, and an Idiot's Array of good fortune, triumphed over Xim the Despot's war-machines at the Third Battle of Vontor.

*Sound: Chink-chink of hammers echo across an underground pit. Roar of furnaces and bellows.*

**NARRATOR:** But somehow Xim escaped and evaded capture, providing Kossak's rivals the ammunition they needed to call for his ouster and stake their claim on the galactic throne.

*Sound: Whip cracks, far and wide.*

**NARRATOR:** So it is now that Kossak casts his nets far and wide across the stars, offering a king's ransom if the former Despot is brought alive to his Court on Nal Hutta, the planet once known as Evocar. Kossak has yet to consider that Xim may in fact already be there...

### **SCENE -- SLAVE PITS OF EVOCAR**

*Sound: Scampering in the gravel.*

**EVOCII SLAVE:** No... please don't...

**GAMORREAN GUARD:** BULLYING GRUNTS.

*Sound: Sizzle of force pike impaling flesh.*

**EVOCII SLAVE:** SHRIEK TURNS INTO WHIMPER. BODY THUDS.

**GAMORREAN GUARD:** WHURFLES A LAUGH.

*Sound: Hammering around the pit continues. Two pick-axes chip away, one after the other.*

**PRISONER:** (WHISPERS) Hey...hey you, with the long face.

**YAAR:** Wh-whoo says that?

**PRISONER:** Over here, in the shadows, wearing the raider-rag.

**YAAR:** Outlander -- we risk death if we talk.

**PRISONER:** Didn't hear a peep out of your friend until he was singled out.  
(CLOSER) I say we take the pig. You trip him up, I'll stab his head.

*Sound: Scrapes pick a few times against rock.*

**PRISONER:** Come on. My pick's as sharp as it'll ever be.

**YAAR:** Now is not the time, outlander.

**PRISONER:** You some kind of ring-tail? That was one of your own he killed.

**YAAR:** And Yaar will sing his brother's story forever in the Cry. But the penance is not paid. The stars have not aligned.

*Sound: Axe dings rock. Pebbles scatter.*

**YAAR:** Lom has not arrived.

**PRISONER:** Lom? I pray that's your word for courage, else the only song your kind will ever sing will be a death rattle.

**YAAR:** Lom is the mother-son with jewels for his eyes. Lom is the Acolyte who will quiet the Cry. Lom is the liberator who the Mighty Ones cannot deny.

**PRISONER:** Mighty Ones, hah. The Hutts are mighty only in girth.

**YAAR:** You have not seen their power, outlander. Yaar recalls the day they descended from the heavens, conjuring fires in the wind, candles that never ceased, beams that burned skin to ash.

**PRISONER:** Charmed by the pretty lights, eh? Let me guess. You begged the slugs for their secrets, and they happily consented, if your beggarly race served them for generations to come.

**YAAR:** How do you know the plight of the Evocii?

**PRISONER:** Please. I know the Hutts.

**YAAR:** We wish we never knew of them. For we abandoned our mother-jewel believing they were mightier than her. (SIGHS) That is the great sorrow of our Cry. Now we pay the penance until the stars align and Lom arrives.

**PRISONER:** Well, I guarantee he's not coming -- so unless you take the fight to the Hutts, you'll rot here, building palaces for worms.

*Sound: Big smash. Splintering rock. A small landslide.*

**MORGG:** (APPROACHING) WIND-BAG OF GAMORREAN SNORTS.

**YAAR:** Very sorry, Morgg. Back to work Yaar goes--

*Sound: Swoosh of force pike.*

**YAAR:** YOWLS.

**MORGG:** PORCINE GUFFAWS.

*Sound: Another swoosh -- clangs unexpectedly against metal.*

**PRISONER:** Poke that stick around again, pig, and find your carcass hanging on my axe.

**MORGG:** CHUFFS AN ANGRY RETORT.

**PRISONER:** What'd you say? Try speaking through your mouth for once.

**YAAR:** (HUFFING) Outlander... it is not wise to provoke --

**PRISONER:** What's the matter? Yaar doesn't like his breakfast meats? 'Cause I hear smoked Gamorrean is succulent this time of year.

**MORGG:** SNOUTFUL OF IRE. ARMOR SHAKES.

*Sound: Duel of pike versus pick-axe. Clangs and bangs.*

**YAAR:** Please, heed Yaar, outlander...drop the axe!

**PRISONER:** (HEFTS PICK-AXE) Over his dead body.

*Sound: Resounding clash, echoes across the pits.*

**YAAR:** But his pike --

*Sound: Electricity courses through force pike, zips into pick-axe -- then through circuits!*

**PRISONER:** (YELLS OUT) You honorless sow! You hit my receptors!

**YAAR:** -- it fries.

*Sound: Axe clatters on ground. Electrical circuits flickering and fizzing on-off, on-off.*

**MORGG:** GURGLES SURPRISE.

**YAAR:** (GASPS) Outlander, under your wrap, your eyes -- they flicker, they flash...

**PRISONER:** The pick, indigen, give me yours!

**MORGG:** WAR WHOOPS.

**YAAR:** Could it be? Has Evocar forgiven us? Has jewel-eyed Lom arrived at last?

*Sound: Force pike hums as it's clocked.*

**PRISONER:** Give it!

**MORGG:** BELCHES A FINAL BATTLE CRY.

*Sound: Force pike cuts through the air...crashes against pick-head.*

**PRISONER:** Go drool on your mother, swine. You can try to blind me, but you're still no match.

**MORGG:** PIGGY RAGE.

**SHOOL:** (FROM OFF) Morgg -- is there a problem over there?

**MORGG:** Errm?

*Sound: Pike and pick disengage.*

**PRISONER:** (UNDER BREATH) That's right, snivel before your superiors.

**SHOOL:** (MOVING ON) What exactly is the matter?

**MORGG:** WET BLUBBERS.

**PRISONER:** We were working. That pork-belly just wanted someone to bother.

**MORGG:** SNURFS BACK.

**SHOOL:** And why should I believe a slave?

**PRISONER:** Am I the one spitting all over you?

**MORGG:** BLASTS OF NASAL EXHAUST.

**SHOOL:** Indigen Yaar, can you at least, in that endearing starseer wisdom of yours, explain the situation without resorting to juvenile insults?

**YAAR:** We...were whispering, Adjudicator Shool.

**PRISONER:** (MUTTERS) Thus the slave enslaves himself.

**YAAR:** Elsewise, the outlander speaks true. Morgg makes it hard to meet the stone-break number.

**SHOOL:** Does he? Well, given Morgg's past behavior, I have reason to believe you.

**MORGG:** SLUDGE OF SQUEALS.

**SHOOL:** Squelch it, Morgg. I didn't come to Evocar to prosecute pit supervisors for their boredom. But be aware that if the Mighty One runs out of workers, he might have to indenture some Gamorreans to swing the picks. Is that understood?

**MORGG:** STILL JOWLING UP EXCUSES.

**SHOOL:** I said, is that understood?

**MORGG:** WINDS DOWN INTO OINKS OF SUBMISSION.

**SHOOL:** Good. Now go -- and make sure you clean up that other carcass so I don't have a report to file.

**MORGG:** BLABS AND HOOFS AWAY.

**PRISONER:** Back to the sty he goes...

**YAAR:** Yaar thanks you, Adjudicator. You are a true man of justice.

**SHOOL:** Flattery will get you nowhere, indigen. I sincerely doubt this incident was entirely Morgg's fault.

*Sound: Photoreceptor circuits keep flickering static.*

**SHOOL:** What's wrong with your eyes, slave?

**PRISONER:** Shutter malfunction. The pig zapped them with his stick.

**SHOOL:** Implants? How repulsive.

**PRISONER:** They work better than eye-patches.

**SHOOL:** What were you, a pirate?

**PRISONER:** (CHUCKLES) Yarrrr.

**SHOOL:** I detest pirates. I've made it my mission in life to prosecute your kind of scum.

**PRISONER:** So sorry we won't ever be friends.

**SHOOL:** Perhaps Morgg was correct. Perhaps there *does* need to be a reduction in the workforce.

**PRISONER:** Well, I never signed up for this job.

**YAAR:** Please -- this outlander stone-breaks double that of us Evocii. Without him, the palace will take many more cycles than the Mighty One wishes.

*Sound: Work bell rings across camp. Collective groan of relief. Hammering stops.*

**PRISONER:** Court's over, Adjudicator. You going to convict me or can I spend another night in my no-star accommodations?

**SHOOL:** What's your name, slave?

**PRISONER:** I've been called a thousand things. But usually I go by Xim.

*Sound: Loud slap against cheek.*

**SHOOL:** Don't play games with me, half-bot. As the adjudicator elected to bring the Despot himself to justice, I have the most impressive resources at my disposal. You don't want me to extract the information out of you.

*Sound: Multitudes march by, dragging chains. A few whips crack. Hungry snorts.*

**YAAR:** Outlander, please cooperate!. We must go else the Mighty One makes feast-food out of those who do not make the gate!

**SHOOL:** Yes, perhaps a Gamorrean can chew what I want out of you.

**PRISONER:** On second thought, since I am in such esteemed company...it's no secret the indigens around here call me, ah, Lom.

**SHOOL:** Lom?

**YAAR:** (GASPS AGAIN) *Lom?*

**PRISONER:** Yeah. Lom.

**YAAR:** So it's true...

**SHOOL:** That of Barseg ancestry?

**PRISONER:** You'd have to ask my mother. But she's dead.

**SHOOL:** Then let this serve as a warning, Lom. If I hear another grumble from Morgg or see even a misplaced swing of those picks, I'll toss both of you before the High Judge himself. And then you will woe the day you were given life.

**PRISONER:** Nothing new to me.

*Sound: Gates begin to close. Large drove of Gamorreans gibbering their appetites.*

**YAAR:** We must go! They're closing the gates!

**SHOOL:** I'd do as the starseer suggests. Because this time I will not stand in the way of the Mighty Ones' laws and a Gamorrean stomach.

**PRISONER:** A true man of justice you are, Adjudicator. May you catch your despot before he catches you.

*Music: Up.*

## **SCENE -- DUNGEON CELL**

*Sound: Closed confines. Incessant dripping. A deep place of the deepest suffering. Moans of every pitch and groan -- sopranos, altos, tenors, baritones -- blend together to sing a ghostly threnody.*

**PRISONER:** By Tion's spleen -- hour after hour, they whine and they wail, like those tone-deaf fanes of Xo!

*Sound: Bangs, kicks bars.*

**PRISONER:** Just gag it or die already, and allow us all some rest! If you cravens even knew who I was. . .

*Sound: The Cry continues, unabated.*

**YAAR:** But Great Acolyte, can you not hear? We sing of you.

**PRISONER:** (VOICE TURNS) Me?

**YAAR:** We sing of the emissary of the mother-jewel, of the outlander who rattles his cage, of the starlord with a thousand names, for us but one in the same. Lom, Great Acolyte, we cry to you for deliverance.

**PRISONER:** Lom? The name I used in the pits? That was a joke, don't you understand? To throw that shill off my back.

**YAAR:** But Yaar did not laugh. Yaar's faith is strong.

**PRISONER:** Then you're more of a nerf than I thought. Get this straight: I care nothing for you or your miserable people. I only want one last whack at the Grand Sleemo himself before I drown in my own blood.

**YAAR:** Though Lom will deny and Lom will deceive, by his eyes will you know him, for they glow like the heavenly sisters of the mother-jewel.



**PRISONER:** These are just mechanical, you primitive. Look into them. Do you see deliverance?

*Sound: Faint electric zips and zaps of blown optic sensors.*

**PRISONER:** Or do they make your head pound, like they're making mine?

**OZIAF:** (FROM OFF) Master?

*Sound: Dungeon suddenly gets quiet, Cry and all. Distant splashing in puddle.*

**PRISONER:** What was that?

*Sound: More splashing. Foot thumps on stone.*

**OZIAF:** (SQUEAKY VOICE, FROM OFF) Master, are you down here?

**PRISONER:** Who goes there?

**OZIAF:** (MOVING ON) Master, it is you!

**PRISONER:** Get within a meter of these bars and you'll be shrieking louder than any of these cowards.

**OZIAF:** Master! Do you not recognize your dear and diminutive servant?

**PRISONER:** I have many servants. Speak your name. My photoreceptors are in disrepair.

**OZIAF:** Then your faithful Oziaf will fix them right once he takes you from this bad-bad place!

**PRISONER:** Dwarf?

*Sound: Keychain rattles. Key inserted in lock, which clicks after key turns.*

**OZIAF:** Yes, yes, master and servant unite at last!

*Sound: Rusty hinges creak. Cell door opens.*

**PRISONER:** How did you get here? How did you find me?

**OZIAF:** Pricked my ears and listened to all the cries and whispers in the galaxy. Never did I think I'd hear your voice down in the dungeon.

**YAAR:** The voice of Lom carries through stone and star in measure to his power.

**OZIAF:** Master, we must be quick! The guard will come.

**YAAR:** Lom, stay with us --

**PRISONER:** Paws off, runt!

**YAAR:** But Lom, after all this suffering, have we not paid the price? Deliver us, we plead!

**PRISONER:** (SPLASHES OFF) Deliver yourselves.

*Sound: The Cry rises in volume, a sad song. . .*

### **SCENE -- DESERTED STAIRWELL**

*Sound: . . . before fading away into the closed confines of a stairwell.*

**PRISONER:** Skulls of Spinax, even Cron didn't groan like that under my blade!

**OZIAF:** Master, watch the last step.

*Sound: Crumbling rock rolls down stairwell.*

**PRISONER:** Where are you taking me?

*Sound: Keys shake.*

**OZIAF:** Your loyal servant has it all planned. He sneaked, he stole, first keys, then a speeder...

**PRISONER:** No speeder's going to take us off this rock. We'll need a ship.

**OZIAF:** Yes, even a starship!

*Sound: Insert. Turn. Snap.*

**OZIAF:** Oh no. Master...

**PRISONER:** What?

**OZIAF:** ...oh no oh no oh no... the lock -- it's changed!

**PRISONER:** Move, dwarf.

*Sound: Feet placed. Soft thud.*

**PRISONER:** (GRUNTS) Probably carved this door myself.

*Sound: Thud. Door scrapes against floor.*

**OZIAF:** Yes, master, I can see the sky!

**PRISONER:** (THROUGH TEETH) One more shove --

*Sound: Loud scrape... door opens.*

**PRISONER:** At last, the cold wind of freedom, the first breath of revenge --

**SHOOL:** (FROM OFF) I wouldn't start making plans quite yet, Xim.

**XIM/PRISONER:** Shool...

**SHOOL:** (MOVING ON) To think we scoured the stars, even hired Lirdarc himself to hunt you down, and there you were, Xim the Deposed, lurking right under our feet, breaking stones.

**XIM/PRISONER:** Out of the way or your neck will be next thing I'll break.

**SHOOL:** I doubt that very much. *Sound: Ungreased servomotors grind.*

**ZIZO:** (MOVING ON, VOCODERIZED VOICE) Halt immediately or suffer heatbeam incalcescence.

**XIM/PRISONER:** Wha -- Corps Commander?

**ZIZO:** Designation Corps Commander no longer relevant. Address this unit as zee-one-zee-zero for all future input.

**XIM/PRISONER:** How dare you talk to me like that! I order you to shoot this dreg law clerk at once!

**ZIZO:** Command rejected. Authorization invalid.

**XIM/PRISONER:** Invalid? Process my voice-print, you no-bit! Shoot him now I said!

**OZIAF:** Master, Zizo is no longer capable --

**ZIZO:** Voice-print identified as primary enemy Xim. Failure to further comply will result in your annihilation.

**SHOOL:** CHUCKLING.

**XIM/PRISONER:** Shool -- what have you done to muck up my machines?

**SHOOL:** Me? I would never even touch a button. Disgusting creatures, automata...yet useful at times, thanks to that T'iin-T'iin tinkerer of yours.

**XIM/PRISONER:** (FUMING) Dwarf...

**OZIAF:** (MOVING BACK) It was not to be like this, master, no, not like this...

**SHOOL:** The little genius should take more credit for his work. Not only did he save the Court the expense of a bailiff, his upgrades permitted us to discern your voice among the indigenous babble.

**XIM/PRISONER:** A needless waste. I told you I was here myself, but you didn't listen.

*Sound: Clink open of chained cuff restraints.*

**SHOOL:** The game is up, Xim. Give me your wrists. Let us do this in the manner of our breed.

**XIM/PRISONER:** Then how's your taste in flesh? Because the moment you try to put that chain around me, I will sink my teeth --

**SHOOL:** Zizo.

*Sound: Robotic weapon arm swivels.*

**ZIZO:** Target locked and awaiting command.

**OZIAF:** Master, please! There is still a chance Kossak will spare you!

**XIM/PRISONER:** Kossak? Is he the one who pays your bills, Adjudicator?

**SHOOL:** Give me some credit, Xim. Accepting payment would be against my civic responsibilities. I merely serve at the foot of galactic justice.

**XIM/PRISONER:** Well, if Kossak's tugging your leash, then today's your lucky day. Here. Bind my wrists. I've been dying to square off with that yellow-bellied dunghill since he turned tail on Vontor at his own challenge of a duel.

**SHOOL:** I knew you would comply. Stand down, Zizo.

*Sound: Chains wrapped tight. Cuffs snap shut.*

**SHOOL:** But if he deviates even a step from my lead, aim for his knees.

*Music: Up.*

## **SCENE -- GRAND AUDIENCE CHAMBER**

*Music: Fluter Wiles and the Licks play their greatest flunk hits.*

*Sound: Rabble of voices. Deals, quarrels, catcalls, and a general hubbub of licentiousness... all turn deathly quiet at the approach of robot clanks and footsteps on marble.*

**XIM:** (SNIFFS) I may be almost blind, but I know that smell. It stank up Vontor.

*Music: Dance number abruptly finishes.*

**OZIAF:** (WHISPERS) Master, making the Mighty One angry may discourage him from mercy.

**XIM:** Silence, dwarf. You have squeaked enough.

**KOSSAK:** (SNORTS AWAKE, STARTLED, FROM OFF) [Who killed the music?]

**SHOOL:** O Hallowed Magnitude, forgive this disturbance. But the one I cast before you may rouse you to ineffable ecstasy.

**XIM:** Don't touch me --

*Sound: Chains drag on floor.*

**KOSSAK:** (FROM CONFUSED TO DELIGHTED) Huh...vah?

**SHOOL:** I bring you the prize of seventeen systems, the indomitable heir of Argai, slayer of Cron, sacker of Ko Vari, former crown-prince of a thousand worlds, and the villain vanquished at Vontor.

**KOSSAK:** [At last, we have the mighty Xim!]

**XIM:** Kossak.. (SPITS) Your stench precedes you.

**KOSSAK:** [Which will only grow sweeter once you begin to sweat.]

**MORGG:** BURBLES LAUGHTER.

**XIM:** You're here, too, Morgg? Guess every house needs a family pet.

**MORGG:** BOARISH SNARLS.

**KOSSAK:** [Where was the son of a cur hiding?]

**SHOOL:** Can you believe in the dungeons, with the indigens?

**CROWD:** GASPS OF SURPRISE.

**SHOOL:** A masterful disguise, I admit. No one suspected that the great Despot would poke out his own eyes to conceal himself.

**XIM:** I can squeeze out yours, too, if you'd like.

**KOSSAK:** [Even now, so arrogant. But we will see after the judgment, won't we, Shool?]

**SHOOL:** (CLEARS THROAT) Gentlebeings of the Court, at last it is time. Take your seats.

**CROWD:** SHUFFLING AND FUNNELING INTO THE BACKGROUND.

*Sound: Chairs moved, bulks deposited, a chattering of excitement.*

**XIM:** Wait -- wait just a sec. You truly mean to forge ahead with this sham trial, and not stage my execution?

**SHOOL:** While capital punishment does seem an appropriate punitive measure for your crimes, you must be convicted first.

**XIM:** Skin a Pui-ui, either I have lost my wits...or the Hutt has lost his guts!

**KOSSAK:** [No, poor once-mighty Xim, it is you who have lost.]

**SHOOL:** Unlike tyrants of previous regimes, His Immensity has listened to the pleas of his people and has pledged from this orbit forward that even the lowest vermin accused of criminality will receive a fair hearing before any judgment is passed.

**CROWD:** WILD APPLAUSE.

**KOSSAK:** [Yes, I hear you, I hear you, my people.]

**SHOOL:** Today's trial marks the dawn of a new age, a New Mandate for all citizens, with Kossak the Just at the helm.

**XIM:** (SNORTS) Kossak the *Just*?

**KOSSAK:** [The Empire of Xim is toast.]

**XIM:** Spare me the guano, Bloated One. These nerfs will soon learn there's no such thing as an enlightened despot.

**CROWD:** HECKLES AND BOOS.

**SHOOL:** Bring forward the charges, chamberlain.

**OZIAF:** (MOVING ON) Coming...

*Sound: Stone slate pushed across marble floor.*

**XIM:** *Chamberlain?* Is that what you've been doing this whole time, dwarf? Slaving for the Hutts?

**OZIAF:** (STRUGGLING) Master, I was only looking out for you, good master...

**XIM:** How dare you even call me master!

**SHOOL:** Your services are no longer required, chamberlain. Morgg -- fetch the slate from him!

**OZIAF:** I am sorry, master, so sorry...

**MORGG:** ROWDY YOBOING

**OZIAF:** (SCAMPERS OFF). . .eeee!

**XIM:** Like a rat to its hole. But remember, dwarf, that the Tinnell always catches its T'iin-T'iin.ii

**KOSSAK:** [Do not try my patience any longer. Begin this, Shool.]

**SHOOL:** Yes, Your Honor. (ALoud) Gentlebeings assembled, and those trillions watching from the Maw to the Void...

**CROWD:** LOWERS TO A MURMUR.

**SHOOL:** I, Rexrax Shool, esteemed legal esquire of Ko Vari and elected adjudicator of this sector, call the Court of Evocar to session, with the Honorable Kossak presiding over the trial of the galactic citizenry versus the tyrant Xim. .

**XIM:** I am a despot, *not* a tyrant.

**SHOOL:** Hear now, Xim, Son of Xer, the charges the citizens of the galaxy level against you-- hold them up, Morgg.

**MORGG:** GRUNTS AS LIFTS SLATES.

**XIM:** This should be interesting.

**SHOOL:** First and foremost, Xim, Son of Xer, you are charged with causing the extermination and extinction of nine sentient species.

**XIM:** Nine? I know I spaced more than that.

**SHOOL:** Among them the Qadel, the Ermi, the Veeza, and the Zoa'mon...

**XIM:** Slavers all. I did the galaxy a favor.

**SHOOL:** The soothsisters of Pelgrin--

**XIM:** Their Oracle claimed my empire was doomed. Such a prophecy could have wreaked widespread panic, even galactic war.

**SHOOL:** And lastly the Klee, the Izi, the Orrananans, and the Thrella.a

**XIM:** With the Izi. . . perhaps I went too far. But I'm not the only one who loathed their poetry.

**CROWD:** VOCIFEROUS DISGUST.



**SHOOL:** The citizenry also charges you Xim, Son of Xer, with the unjustified decimation of countless peoples and worlds, including Vodran, Jurzuu, and Ko Vari.

**XIM:** Of Vodran I have no recollection. But Ko Vari -- did I not just hear you were a native, Adjudicator?

**SHOOL:** Excuse me?

**KOSSAK:** [Just read, Shool. Don't let him rattle you.]

**SHOOL:** (DEEP BREATH) Thirdly, the citizenry charges you Xim, Son of Xer, with violating the Automata Accords by your manufacture and deployment of military robots.

**XIM:** Would the citizenry rather I lead another billion living beings to their slaughter? I was saving their hides.

*Sounds: Clank of robot feet.*

**ZIZO:** (MOVING ON) Objection. My steel-brothers were not built for scrap.

**XIM:** Neither did I build you for treachery.

**SHOOL:** Knowing the charges laid against you, how do you plead, Xim, Son of Xer?

**XIM:** Plead? Despots never plead. This court has no authority over me. Even the Code of Cron gives the Ruler of Worlds immunity from prosecution.

**KOSSAK:** [Hah! You rule nothing.]

**SHOOL:** The defendant's contempt of this Court bars him from making an opening statement. So without further ado, the prosecution calls its first witness, the Queen of Ranroon. Your Majesty, please take the stand.

**INDREXU:** (FROM OFF) My pleasure.

*Sound: Stilettos on marble. Jewelry clinks.*

**XIM:** Polluters of Z'gag -- Indrexu?b

**INDREXU:** (MOVING ON) In previous days, the mere sight of me would cause you to lose breath.

**CROWD:** WHISTLES AT THE LADY.

**MORGG:** LICKS HIS CHOPS.

**XIM:** My photoreceptors...seem to be malfunctioning.

**INDREXU:** Always, always your receptors.

**CROWD:** CACKLES FROM ON HIGH.

**KOSSAK:** [Order! Sit your purge-holes down now!]

**CROWD:** QUIETS TO A DULL ROAR.

**SHOOL:** Your Majesty, please raise your right hand.

**INDREXU:** Do make this quick, Adjudicator. I'd hate to stand up the new King of Cron at his coronation.

**XIM:** Of all the half-cred harlots...

**SHOOL:** Your Majesty, do you swear that the testimony you are about to give is the truth and nothing but, by the Original Light so help you?

**INDREXU:** I swear.

**XIM:** After what I did for you...

**SHOOL:** For the record of this Court, please state your name, occupation, and point of origin.

**INDREXU:** My name is Hylei Indrexu Cortess, the eighth wife of Xer. I was born and raised a simple Mamzin of Ranroon, though most know me as their Queen --

**XIM:** A title I gave you.

**INDREXU:** A title bestowed upon me by my Mamzin sisters upon marriage to my beloved husband, Xer, who was mutilated by this savage here -- a father massacred by his own son, right before my eyes!

**XIM:** You made no complaint when you knelt to my sword.

**INDREXU:** That is not true.

**CROWD:** HISSES.

**SHOOL:** The prosecution demands that the defendant refrain from comment until cross-examination.

**KOSSAK:** [Sustained.]

**XIM:** There's no need, because there'll be no cross-examination. This trial is a charade. As is she.

**CROWD:** OOOOHH.

**XIM:** Check the registries. She's not from Ranroon, no Mamzin at all-- just some wench my father picked up while philandering in the Ihala.c

**INDREXU:** Which means you're even more illegitimate than you know.

**CROWD:** CACKLES AND GUFFAWS.

**MORGG:** SPITS JUICE EVERYWHERE.

**XIM:** Laugh it up, slug-lovers. I only did what any honorable son would do, when he discovered his own mother had been poisoned. It was my error that I blamed my father. I should've run my cutlass through this witch.

**SHOOL:** As I said, if the accused cannot stay his tongue--

**INDREXU:** (INTERRUPTING) Where is the proof to these outrageous accusations?

**XIM:** In my mother's tissue. I had her body exhumed, and tests confirmed traces of neuro-synox, correlating to the batch I found in your vanity room.

**CROWD:** FIRST HINTS OF DOUBT.

**INDREXU:** I will say it again. I did not kill your mother.

**XIM:** SNORTS.

**INDREXU:** Xim, I *am* your mother.

**CROWD:** SOAP OPERA GASPS.

**SHOOL:** STUTTERS.

**MORGG:** SLOBBERS.

**XIM:** So?

**KOSSAK:** (BELLY-ACHING DELIGHT) [Hohohohoho! The once-mighty Xim is a first-class bastard after all!]

**CROWD:** AN ECHO CHAMBER OF ALIEN LAUGHTER.

**SHOOL:** Order, order, please!

**INDREXU:** I should've strangled you at birth.

**XIM:** I'm glad you strangled me when you did. . .

**SHOOL:** Morgg, Zizo--

**MORGG:** CHEST THUMPING.

**ZIZO:** Awaiting instruction. Name targets for recommended annihilation.

**CROWD:** QUIETS IMMEDIATELY.

*Sound: Stilettos strike marble hard.*

**SHOOL:** Your Majesty, you haven't finished your testimony --

**INDREXU:** What is finished is the relationship between the Hutts and the Confederacy, unless you execute this liar immediately.

**KOSSAK:** [What? No!]

**SHOOL:** Your Honor, there are other witnesses. I am sure I can get a solid conviction.

**INDREXU:** Cook him, Kossak, or we're done.

**XIM:** Such a kind, devoted mother.

**CROWD:** WAITING WITH BATED BREATH.

**KOSSAK:** [Fine. Fry him.]

**SHOOL:** I must protest! This sets a dangerous precedent if we cannot adhere to the laws we ourselves envisioned!

**KOSSAK:** [Laws are made to be broken, stupid fool. Roast him to dust and ash, I have ruled!]

**SHOOL:** (SIGHS) As you command, Your Honor.

**INDREXU:** Forget Cron. His Immensity may get his kiss after all.

**KOSSAK:** SMACKS LIPS, GUTTURAL PLEASURE.

**MORGG:** PIPS A ME, TOO?

**SHOOL:** (ALoud) Hear ye, hear ye, citizens of the Court and across the galaxy. In his Preponderant Wisdom, Kossak the Just rules that the accused is guilty of his crimes and condemns him to a slow and painful death.

**CROWD:** JUBILATION.

**SHOOL:** (MURMURS) The trial of Xim the Despot is now concluded.

**XIM:** So much for justice, eh, Adjudicator?

**SHOOL:** Unit zee-one-zee-zero, initiate the Burning.

**MORGG:** DELIGHTED GOBBLES.

**XIM:** *The Burning*, you said?

*Sound: Power spirals in volume.*

**KOSSAK:** (GLEEFUL LAUGHS) [Everyone see how Xim cringes at his end!]

**XIM:** Your eyesight must be worse than mine, you genderless gastropod. I've not even fluttered. And yes, somehow the Burning seems fitting-- to die by the very method I conceived will be like dying by own hands.

**CROWD:** SILENCED. THIS IS ONE BAD ROTWORM.

**ZIZO:** Beam tubes operational. State target.

**INDREXU:** The bastard in manacles.

**XIM:** Your Maker, Corps Commander. Let me show you all how a despot dies.

*Sound: Weapon arm servos rotate.*

**ZIZO:** Primary target acquired.

**XIM:** Behold, toadies of Kossak, the birth of a new reign of terror --

**KOSSAK:** [Fire!]

*Sound: Focused heatbeam. Long sizzle.*

**XIM:** TORTURED SCREAM.

**ZIZO:** Please refrain from movement to mitigate discomfort.

**CROWD:** BEGINNINGS OF NAUSEA. SECOND THOUGHTS.

**INDREXU:** Lock the gate, Morgg. Justice must have its witnesses.

**MORGG:** YUPS AGREEMENT AND PLODS OFF.

**KOSSAK:** [More!]

*Sound: Longer sizzle. Flesh being seared.*

**INDREXU:** As lovely as a dying supernova...

**XIM:** HOWLS IN AGONY.

**INDREXU:** Watch how his flesh congeals, Adjudicator.

**SHOOL:** I now see from what ilk Xim was spawned. We've merely exchanged one brand of tyranny for another.

**INDREXU:** And congratulations, Adjudicator. You've played a vital role.

**XIM:** PURE ANGUISH.

*Sound: Another scream bolsters Xim's, lending added weight and volume...and sadness.*

**INDREXU:** Zizo, incinerate his vocal cords while you're at it. No one wants to listen to him wailing like an infant.

**SHOOL:** I don't think that noise is Xim...

*Sound: The ghostly Cry reverberates in the low frequencies and screeches the highest.*

**ZIZO:** Alert, alert -- high frequency resonance fracturing internal gas chambers. Shutting down beam tubes.

*Sound: Glass cracks. Heatbeam fizzles out.*

**INDREXU:** Zizo-- don't stop now!

**XIM:** GASPS FOR RELIEF.

*Sound: The Cry continues, enveloping the chamber in its echo..*

**KOSSAK:** [What is that racket?]

**MORGG:** MAD PIG, RUNNING BACK AND FORTH.

**INDREXU:** Zizo -- just kill him!

**SHOOL:** But it's not Xim!

**ZIZO:** Source of resonance located. Indigenous life-forms swarming from dungeon stairwells.

**OZIAF:** (FROM OFF) Master, master, more friends for you has your faithful servant freed!

*Sound: Onrush of a hundred floppy feet reinforced by a hundred shrill voices yowling their sad, wordless song.*

**INDREXU:** The slaves?

**KOSSAK:** [Evocii bantha poodoo! Return to your cells or suffer my divine wrath!]

**YAAR:** (MOVING ON) That is not to be, Mighty One. For Lom has joined our Cry and the children of Evocar have come to sing the last verse.

**KOSSAK:** Morgg!

**MORGG:** GNASHING TEETH IN BOAR-RUSH.

**YAAR:** Sing, brothers and sisters! Let Morgg hear your Cry, loud and high!

*Sound: The Cry doubles in volume and pitch.*

**MORGG:** STOPS IN HIS TRACKS. PAINFUL SQUEALS.

**YAAR:** Return Morgg to the mother-jewel. There he can never kill again.

**MORGG:** SERIES OF BEASTLY CROAKS, LEADING TO A FINAL OINK.

*Sound: Armor and trinkets jingle. Corpse crashes to the floor.*

**KOSSAK:** [Morgg! My poor Morgg! You will pay for that with your lives! Vaporize them, Zizo!]

**INDREXU:** Do it, Zizo-- silence these wretched creatures -- shoot them all!

**ZIZO:** Switching to pulse cannons. Re-calibrating for maximum power

**SHOOL:** Maximum power? What about the audience?

**ZIZO:** Advise non-indigenous life-forms to disperse.

**CROWD:** MASS PANIC.

**SHOOL:** But Zizo, the gates -- they're locked! No one can get out!

**INDREXU:** Adjudicator, haven't you learned by now it's pointless to argue with an automaton? They compute only two possibilities. Garbage in...

*Sound: Weapon arm tracks, beeping for lock.*

**SHOOL:** (RUNNING OFF) Zizo, no! Innocents will be caught in the cross--

*Sound: Pulse whisks into the center of a group.*

**SHOOL:** SHRIEKS, VAPORIZED BY PULSE BEAM.

**INDREXU:** ...garbage out.

**ZIZO:** Non-indigenous life-forms disperse...non-indigenous life-forms disperse...

*Sound: Pulse cannon unloads bursts and quiets the tenor section of the chorus, who go out on a high note.*



**ZIZO:** (FROM OFF) Direct hit! Direct hit!

**CROWD:** SCREAMS OF THE DAMNED.

*Sound: Walls of the chamber begin to fracture, like cracks in ice.*

**ZIZO:** Alert, alert. High frequency resonance damaging palace structure. Ceiling vulnerable to collapse. Advise immediate evacuation.

**KOSSAK:**[What -- my palace! Woman! Help me!]

**INDREXU:** (MOVING OFF) Fat chance, Hutt. I won't be buried alive,

*Sound: Pulses sweep across the chamber.*

**YAAR:** Be not afraid, brothers and sisters. Stand your ground. Sing your Cry.

*Sound: Death rattles raise the pitch of the Cry. Cracking become more frequent. Pebbles fall, clatter on metal.*

**KOSSAK:** [Get me off this throne right this moment you salvaged bolt-board!]

**ZIZO:** Hutt conveyance possible only after structural restabilization. Eleven-point-three seconds to collapse. Emergency shutdown triggered for self-preservation. Advise the same. (ZAPS OUT)

**KOSSAK:** NOBATA!

**YAAR:** Brothers and sisters, step back and sing the final notes!

*Sound: The Cry reaches its greatest octave. Part of ceiling falls. Rocks shower down.*

**YAAR:** Louder, higher! Encase the Mighty One in our Cry!

**KOSSAK:** ROARS LIKE A BEACHED WHALE.

*Sound: A storm cloud of stone rains down.*

**YAAR:** Now fly! Soar away on the sail of our song!

**KOSSAK:** BELLOWS HIS ULTIMATE MAGNITUDE.

*Sound: An avalanche of rock muffles Kossak to a few final bleats before drowning out all sound, even the Cry. Then, having lost its source, the cracking stops and the showers turn into sprinkles, until quieting altogether. Some long moments before. . .*

**OZIAF:** (FROM OFF) Master? Master?

*Sound: Paws scratch and scramble through the rubble.*

**OZIAF:** There you are! (MOVING ON) What nice friends your servant found, did you not hear? Master. . . master? Please wake!.

*Sound: Frantic shifting of debris.*

**INDREXU:** (MOVING ON) Away from him, rat. He needs his mother.

*Sound: Knife drawn from scabbard.*

**OZIAF:** You-- snake of Argai! I won't let you hurt my master!

*Sound: Bodies impact. Clawing and fighting.*

**INDREXU:** Get off me you buck-toothed flea-coat! Ahhhh! My hair!

**OZIAF:** Nibble, yank, and scratch will be my duty until you -- (HARD THUD AGAINST ROCK FOLLOWED BY ACHING SQUEAKS)

**INDREXU:** No one touches this face, dwarf.

*Sound: Knife clatters on ground.*

**XIM:** (STRAINED). . . what. . . did you call him?

**INDREXU:** My son. . . you live -- aack! (NECK GRIPPED, CHOKING) What. . . are you doing?

**XIM:** (REGAINING STRENGTH AND BREATH) Returning. . . a mother's love.

**INDREXU:** (RASPS, WHEEZES) Ximmy...please...

**XIM:** Pucker up. I deserve a goodbye kiss.

*Sound: The smack of lips. . . a sucking sound. . . biting. . .*

**INDREXU:** THROAT GURGLING SCREAM.

**XIM:** (MOUTH FULL) There. (SPITS) That forked tongue will never have to lick Hutt tail again.

*Sound: Flesh tail lands on stone.*

**INDREXU:** BLABBERING INCOHERENTLY, SCREAMING OFF.

**XIM:** (RISING) Go run back to Cron. I'm sure he'll appreciate your newfound quiet.

*Sound: Rock and shale tumble off body.*

**OZIAF:** (FROM OFF) Master. . . so sorry. . . your servant, too weak. . . his head pounds. . .

**XIM:** Up, dwarf!

**OZIAF:** ...master? He lives! My master lives! Master and servant both live!

**YAAR:** (MOVING ON) As do a few who sung the Cry.

**OZIAF:** (JUMPING AROUND) Yes yes! All those who love the master live!

**XIM:** I...must be in hell.

**YAAR:** Can you not see, Great Acolyte? The pits have opened. The skies have cleared. And beyond, the stars. . . the stars have moved, Great Lom. They have moved.

**XIM:** First of all, I'm not your Lom. Secondly that's what stars do. They move. And I'm going move with them, off this putrid slimeball.

**YAAR:** Putrid? Slimeball? But Evocar is Paradise once again!

**XIM:** No Paradise ever stunk of Hutt. Outta the way, runts.

**OZIAF:** Master, wherever you go, know that your most loyal and faithful and courageous servant is with you...

**YAAR:** Great Acolyte Lom, the Children of the Mother-jewel too will serve.

*Sound: Gaggle of Evocii follow, thumping floppy feet.*

**XIM:** Dinos of Dellalt, must I forever be smothered by pipsqueaks! A true despot should speak only to the heads of Death itself! Where are my war-robots?

**OZIAF:** Stowed away on your treasure ship, master, as hidden as can be!

**XIM:** What do you mean, *hidden*?

**OZIAF:** Hidden so secretly that no will ever find them-- for your faithful engineer randomized your ship's robo-helm to keep it forever from the master's enemies!

**XIM:** (MOVING OFF) Dwaaaarf!

*Music: Up and under.*

**NARRATOR:** Xim may have survived the slave pits of Evocar, but his return to galactic despotism is far from complete. He has no army to defeat the remaining rebels, and the Evocii, though their Cry can shatter stone, would be butchered on any battlefield.

*Music: Closing theme.*

**NARRATOR:** Hence Xim knows his victory will be short-lived unless he can locate his lost treasure ship, the *Queen of Ranroon*, crewed by the last legion of his dreaded war-robots, lost somewhere in space.

**ANNOUNCER:** CREDITS.

*Music: Plays out to a final fade.*

*Sound: Wind whistles over the desolation, until there comes the scattering of rocks and whir of servomotors.*

**ZIZO:** Structure stabilized. Safe for reactivation.

*Sound: Gears grind to life. Stones clank off metal.*

**ZIZO:** Assessing unit damage.

*Sound: Beeps in the wind.*

**ZIZO:** Beam tubes...shattered. Pulse cannons...pulverized. Right ambulator...impaired. Apparent damage to main processor. Accessing identity subroutines. Unit zee -- ERROR -- ERROR -- command-control circuit

shorted...unit code unknown...master unknown...loading emergency backup...loading...loading...files not found. Reverting to processors-in-memory. Final reboot before potential shutdown...(BLEEP, BLEEP)...reboot successful. Core identity load successful. Please address this unit as zee-eye-emm-emm for all future input. Awaiting command.

*Sound: Cranial turret spins.*

**ZIZO:** Master-control unresponsive. Signaling vicinal steel-brothers for updated corps dispatch.

*Sound: Antenna rises. Garbled transmission begins.*

**ZIZO:** Steel-brothers unresponsive. Ninety-four-point-two-percent possibility that this unit is the last unit standing. Must take all precautions. Testing left ambulator.

*Sound: Metal feet crunch on debris.*

**ZIZO:** Operational. Testing particle discharger.

*Sound: Zap blasts open rock.*

**ZIZO:** Peak performance.

*Sound: Torso swivels, weapons arm tracks.*

**ZIZO:** Attention potential life-forms. Heed this war-robot of Xim.

Sound: Succeeding blasts blow up boulders.

**ZIZO:** Annihilation imminent.

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1: At the time of the revolts, the Elders divested Direus'pei of his full kajidic clan name, effectively erasing him from Hutt memory.

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## Postscript to the Third Edition

There are kinds of Works, my brother-in-Xim Roldan Nokx is fond of saying, that encapsulate the entirety of a being's sapient existence. Often these undertakings tread into the hinterlands of insanity, and not infrequently lead to mortal peril. Yet when one is possessed by an unbridled Enthusiasm for such endeavors, rarely does danger, death, or the threat of utter obscurity deter one who has caught the bug. Though rivals may rocket past him in garnering honors and his own romantic interludes may wither like premature cocoons, he in his determined toil cannot -- and does not -- allow these worldly affairs blind him from the Work at hand. The life-journey of his species affords but a fleeting moment of sentience, and he must spend it wisely, or never finish what he was Called to Do.

For at the end, in the vast scheme of the stars, the Work will be what matters -- that which he fondled in clutchling dreams, wiggled with through all his podal changes, even bit down on budding silk glands to bring to a close. When he wandered through the stacks of Obroa-skai, he resisted the temptation of digressive knowledge and made straight for the datatapes marked X. When he decoded a fragment from an antique log-recorder, he secreted it, in Despotica fashion, until it had its place in the Work. When it looked like there was no more to be found, he sought more out, in the folly and wonder of what humans call Adventure. And during the dark times, when all seemed lost, the Work kept him buzzing. It was his remedy for melancholy, his amusement against hyper-travel tedium, the true love of his larval life. His Destiny.

But why was I of all beings chosen for this mission, this Work you now read? Why was my mind overcome with such indescribable joy when, on a bad date to a Sullustan dinner theater, I first heard the chorus of *The Pirate Prince* that it led me here? I cannot say. Who among us can truly explain their destinies? All I know is that I have done all I can, pulling together every bit of *The Despotica* my 16 appendages could grab and three cortexes could process for the pleasure of all. Surely, there are more tomes out there to be discovered, as there are more to be written. But the call for chrysalis is too sweet for me to further the search. My cocoon is spun, and when I emerge, the Work will but be an afterthought, the fancies of the larval stage.

Go brave, young scholar, take my torch, and dare the dark of Xim. Know that I am with you in spirit, if not in body. As you unearth new discoveries, I will be soaring in the clear skies above the banks of the warm, pink Z'gag, batting my chroma-wings, singing to a new love, whatever it may be.

--S.V. Skynx  
emeritus chair of the Department of History  
Human History subdepartment, pre-Republic subdivision  
University of Ruuria  
and  
Ximologist extraordinaire

### **A SOLDIER'S STORY: "THE GLEAM OF KIIRIUM" (FROM *THE DESPOTICA*)**

Cached datagrab of former University of Ruuria network site, attributed to Professor S.V. Skynx, emeritus chair of the Department of History (network address invalid as of 11 ABY):

#### **ASENEC**

-593 to -244 BBY

*Note: The publishers of The Despotica Reader refused to print this entry for fear of endorsing an artist universally regarded as too despicable to be seriously read. I have posted the monologue here on my network site not to praise the work of Asenec, but to allow the reader to be the ultimate judge of its merit, truth, and beauty.*

Surveys of interspecies prejudices taken since the Original Light consistently reiterate one fascinating statistic: A majority of the galactic population seems to possess an innate disgust for all things gastropodic. Such bigotry infects even that bellwether of liberal thought, literary criticism. Seven hundred years after the death of the lauded Hutt dramatist Direus'pei, many reviewers still snub any work of merit produced by a "slug." The Croke poet Asenec—a member of an exceedingly rare but purportedly diminutive (and slimier) analogue species to the Hutts—receives even harsher treatment. No writer in the civilized galaxy is banned more widely (and vehemently) than Asenec of Crakull.

Discrimination alone does not deserve the full blame for this broad censorship; Asenec appears to have written his poems primarily to sicken, repel, and offend. His verses celebrate the satisfaction of revenge, revel in the squeezing of ooze, commemorate the outrages of tyrants, and depict irradiated wastelands as

milieus of breathtaking beauty. Exceeding the galactic canon of authors in misanthropy and spite, Asenec is our great poet of the darkness, whose volumes are rumored to have enjoyed a place on the shelves of Emperor Palpatine himself.

Given his poetic fondness for villainy, Asenec seems a match made in the Stalbrington hells to take on the diabolical legend of Xim the Despot as a subject for a poem. Yet “The Gleam of Kiirium,” the poet’s sole contribution to the compendium of Xim miscellanea known as *The Despotica*, is unlike anything in his oeuvre. Alleged to have been composed during the Croke’s protracted death wriggles, the dramatic monologue of a Duinarbulon Star Lancer bears Asenec’s signature salute to tyranny, yet is also imbued with a doomed—and daresay romantic—sense of sadness. The nameless soldier of the poem, relishing the chance to fight for her “beloved” Xim in the Second Battle of Vontor, makes a soul-wrenching discovery when Xim and his forces blast off, having used the Star Lancers as a distraction to cover his mining and plunder of Vontor’s kiirium lodes. The somber conclusion the soldier comes to at the end reads as heresy to the unrelenting animosity of Asenec’s other poems. Some critics even charge that “The Gleam of Kiirium” is not Asenec’s work at all, but a clever devotee’s attempt to make their favorite poet more palatable to a larger audience. Recent speculation pegs the monologue’s origin to an ancient authorless tome excavated in the Great Duinarbulon Mausoleum, though the archeologist in charge, Henrietya Antilles, rebuffs such claims. A more-comforting interpretation is that this vicious Croke, near the end of his hate-filled life, experienced a dim epiphany of light.

### **The Gleam of Kiirium**

by Asenec of Crakull

(trans. from Tundan by Kiekal Zzoh)

I.

Xim—of the ravenous blue eyes, the thewy fist, the tremulous, tiny T’iin-T’iin,  
these emblems of my lord, my beloved,  
my despot,  
embroidered in the kiirium coat of my ionic mail  
a vision enough to send enemy legions fleeing  
their own lasers



and to warm me on bitter nights  
when the stars are silent.

Xim—never have I seen your flesh, though your every wish is mine,  
for you understand the ambitious, the unslaked,  
you understand the small,  
you understand we must rob so as to rise  
because what is theirs was but another's  
stolen  
a universe under your venal gaze,  
Cron corrupted to your command, Barseg but a bug,  
and now onto Vontor,  
the glowpearl in the rough, a playpen for Hutts,  
to be yours, and mine,  
and ours.

Xim—I am wedded to you by the lance,  
forged by the craftiest of all Duin smiths,  
its handle twined in Raxan seaweed,  
its vamplate a kiirium mirror like my mail,  
its shaft a stake for slugs and all their slime,  
its barb sprinkled with malkite,  
a deathknell to all who would  
poison  
our union.

## II.

Vontor—at last! A world of cinder and ash  
and veins of kiirium gold  
gleaming from the stars  
though dull on the surface  
is this what cost us the first battle?  
A palmful of pebbles blown away by breath,  
dust,  
blinding dust,  
but that which the 'bots dig we of the lance pledge to defend,  
dust with our blood.

Duin—of the Arbulon suns, why suddenly I dream of you?  
Depart nightmare!

Restless under the Vontorian moons,  
lines drawn, war waiting for its bell,  
and I in the grip of my other love, my first,  
they never last  
a world unknown to dust, its jewels green fields and flowers,  
trumpets heralding grand tournaments, where names are won  
and lost,  
flags rippling in the breeze, crowds on their feet,  
Galdrian mustang barely broken to my heels,  
pounding toward the elder knight, interloper of our age,  
his armor, the gift of a Duke of Desevro, an insult,  
his charger, a colt of Cron, a crime,  
his sneer, hateful of youth, ambition,  
of you, Xim,  
of us,  
he speaks so many traitorous things,  
claims he's only fighting for the money,  
says you are nothing more than a rich Hutt,  
it feeds my anger and my love,  
then the joust comes to destiny,  
his lance the longer, mine the smaller,  
for size, what is size in war but weight,  
clang, slide, break,  
the barb pierces, injects,  
my first victim, my first victory!  
The elder's sneer bends in the mirror of my lance,  
held aloft between our suns,  
blue orbs that remind me of you.

Kossak—  
my stomach turned at dawn  
that ugly sight  
how can it be, that a Hutt has blue eyes,  
that his is the flesh I behold!  
Yet there he is, in all his girth, to rally and lick his toads,  
before the dust dries out their slime,  
bang! The drums beat, a bell tolls,  
the armies march to line,  
I leap upon my Galdrian and join the gallop  
to cry your name my love,  
and wave that worm on my lance.

III.

Xim—did you not hear my cry? Do you not see my blood?  
Brutes they were, the vermin, horde after endless horde,  
Jilurian dervishers on Cyborrean battlemounts,  
Weequays without braids,  
a thousand or more vanquished on my lance alone  
broken now, but a stick  
seaweed untwined, vamplate cracked,  
malkite drenched in antidote  
my spit  
while your stardrives boomed, blinding us with storms,  
how could you leave your legions, your lancers,  
your love  
for but a lode of dust  
how could you?

Xim—whom have I loved? What have I dreamed?  
Precious life, flesh, nibbled away by scavenging neks,  
stolen  
I want it back  
mail ripped and tossed, ions no defense against teeth,  
like a shroud my coat of kiirium falls  
and in the mirror's gleam  
I see what the elder saw.

Xim—your eyes  
and never blue.

**Excerpt from *Travels Amid Strange Stars*, by Bleys Harand:**

*In Eternal Homage to Xim, Whose Fist Shall Enclose the Stars and Whose Name Shall Outlive Time.*

Those words are inscribed on the pitted façade at the entrance to Xim's complex of treasure vaults on Dellalt — vaults built in expectation that they would soon hold the plunder of a hundred Hutt worlds. To note that they stand empty is to miss the more melancholy point that they were never filled in the first place.

I came to Dellalt in search of information about the Despot, the latest in a line of tourists, academics, treasure hunters and curiosity seekers dating back eons. But my goals were modest. I neither quested for the *Queen of Ranroon* nor sought to test my theory about the coordinates of lost Astigone. I was after something much less consequential, and yet more surprising in its absence.

I wished to look upon the face of the Despot.

Xim's fist did indeed enclose stars, or near enough at least. And any name that has endured for twenty-five millennia has an excellent head start on outliving time. But there is no portrait, sculpture or representation of Xim that does not reflect the artist at the expense of the subject. Artists who follow the popular accounts of Peshosloc portray the Despot with his face charred and his ruined eye sockets sprouting war-robots' optics – a romantic vision, to be sure, but one first imagined thousands of years after the actual Xim's demise. In paintings and sensoriums and holo-thrillers we see him bald, long-haired or bearded, his eyes hard or kind, his limbs clad in kingly raiment or warrior's armor. He is everything and everybody, and thus nothing and nobody.

I had come to the Tion seeking a contemporary portrait – one executed by a hand that had obeyed an eye that had gazed upon the actual Xim, the pirate prince turned Daritha of the young galaxy. It mattered not to me that likeness was grand or modest, well-executed or awkward. Authenticity was what I sought — a link to the living.

Above Barancar still drift coils of steel that once formed the Despot's shipyards, now darkened by radiation and pitted by an eternity of micrometeorites. But no image of Xim remains there. On Soruus the Despot towers over the arena where many a gladiator has bled out his dreams. He holds a heatbeam in one great fist, but the statue is polysteel, assembled by a factory on Centares during the chancellorship of Kirbat the Unready. So I am told with sour reluctance by a tour guide who wishes to quiet me, not knowing he has succeeded all too well by revealing that my quest is not over.

On Dravione I learn that aeries once frequented by Xim and his court still await atop the jagged peaks, preserved in the dry chill. But even the most promising one is empty – empty save for a courtyard where stands a pedestal and feet, ankles and calves of stone. Where is the rest of the statue? The guide shrugs, not even bothering with so meager a reply when asked if the statue is Xim. I do not blame him for this truculence: One may as well ask where his grandfather's grandfather misplaced a favored multi-tool.

On Duinarbulon the Parade Grounds are obvious fakes, never trod by one of Xim's mighty Lancers; on Kismaano "merchant" and "swindler" are synonyms, and the quest is not even worth attempting. On Nuswatta Cronese urchins drive our party away from the weedy lumps of the Forbidden Gardens with hurled stones, and the guide says there is nothing to see anymore anyway. On Desevro, beneath the dim light of the dying sun, ships set down at the Jigani Port, built atop ancient pillars repaired with millennia of stone scraps. Here are hieroglyphs and cemented bas-reliefs and endless ancient bric-a-brac, but the runes cannot be read and the names cannot be recalled. Does this cartouche enclose the name of Xim? Is this face the visage of the Despot? No one can say.

Finally, on Argai, I walk in the evening chill amid the rounded stones of Xer's first palace, listening to birdsong and insect buzz. The evening is raw and cold; after the light has surrendered the Indrexu Nebula pulses faintly in infinity above. Xim once stood on this spot and stared at those same colors, and I think that perhaps this is as close as we two, scholar and Despot, are fated to be.

But there is another way of bridging time. Despite being the birthplace of a Daritha, Argai has had no golden age. It is largely unchanged from Xer's days, a hard and cold place inhabited by a hard and cold people. Walking the streets of Sah Gosta, I think that here, perhaps, is Xim. He stands there, stooped and sallow, with lank black hair and a permanent frown. Or there, gesticulating, with spittle at the corner of his mouth. The Argaians are a squat and unlovely people, but they have the wiry strength of those born not to thrive but to endure. It is not hard to imagine them as pirates in cracked boots and work shirts, twin pulse cannons holstered below the X of bandoliers, boarding copper-hulled pinnaces powered by fuel slugs. They looked then as they look now. Why should Xim have looked different than these sons of Argai?

That night I sleep satisfied with the answer. But leaving Sah Gosta, the whimpering groundcar I have hired at mildly larcenous rates expires in a hiss of fluidics, to be autopsied indifferently by its driver. Waiting for something to happen, I find myself leaning against an ancient stone wall – a cemetery. On the other side a gravedigger has cut a new mouth into the stubborn red clay; on a bier waits a cheap coffin with a hinged port, waiting to discharge its renter.

Peering over the wall, I see the perimeter of the graveyard is scattered with bones, adorned here and there by scraps of rough rotted cloth. The skulls of the disinterred stare back at me – everywhere a death's head, the Despot's immortal sigil. And there I see him at last. This is not Xim, of course – and yet it is. For when life has departed and flesh has been stripped, will we all not have the

same blank eyes, the same cheeks of bleached bone, the same empty grin? Here is Xim, and here am I, and here are you, and we are all alike: Despot and slave, victor and vanquished, indistinguishable and eternal.

## 25,000bby

### Sar Argon Recordings

The following recording dates back to approximately 500 years before the First Great Schism that divided the Jedi, and 18,100 years before the exiled Dark Jedi arrived in Sith space, at a time when the Jedi may have still been developing their terminology for the Force. Although the dark side is not mentioned by name in Sar Agorn's record, his descriptions leave little doubt about the nature of the "shadows."

*You ask of my first awareness of evil? That is difficult for me to say. It is not that my memory fails me, but that memories are based on our perceptions at specific moments. Are there not beings, things, or places that you regarded as evil when you were young, but that you subsequently determined were not evil at all? Did you eventually forgive the inconsiderate relative, the howling wind, and the ominous structures that never really posed a threat to you except in your own imagination?*

*Furthermore, how shall we define evil? The common definition is that which is profoundly immoral or wrong, such as the desire to deliberately cause great harm, pain, or upset. But let me ask... if I told you that right now, at this very moment, your involuntary breathing was killing sentient microscopic innocents, would you choose to continue breathing? And even if you found a way to end the massacre, would it disturb you if you were unable to convince the microscopic survivors that you never meant them harm, and that they and their descendants would consider you evil and wish you dead for the devastation you brought to their loved ones and civilization?*

*You say that I tend to answer questions with too many questions in return? Well, how else will you learn to think for yourself?*

*Oh. So you wanted to know if I have ever known of a Jedi who turned to evil. You might have asked that in the first place. For that question, I have a most specific answer: the Jedi Cope Shykrill.*

*First, let me say that this is a most unusual case. As Jedi, we are bonded by our agreement to use our powers for the goodness of all beings, not for personal gain or to exploit others. Yes, there are times when one is tempted to use the Force simply because one can, but if one does not know when and where to draw the line, then ask more questions, and I shall draw it for you.*

*Now, about Cope Shykrill...*

*My fellow Jedi and I had been searching for Force-users like ourselves in the outlying systems of the Corellian sector when we found young Shykrill on Sarcophagus, the graveyard moon of Sacorria. At the time, the boy was living with his family, who were groundskeepers. We had not found him by accident, but by way of a report from a Selonian widower, who claimed to have witnessed Shykrill using telekinesis to lower his wife's coffin into an open grave. Shykrill seemed like a most unassuming child, but was indeed able to move objects through the air with little difficulty.*

Although some families had been reluctant to allow their children to join the Jedi, Shykrill's parents were most accommodating, and even seemed genuinely grateful to us for granting their son the opportunity to rise above his station on Sarcophagus. And so the boy left with us to train as a Jedi. He was such a bright child. Always displayed a pleasant disposition when he asked for more lessons. Never asked a wrong question or gave a wrong answer. Always helped with chores. Never complained. In fact, over the course of eight years of training, he never gave us any cause for caution, or reason to imagine why his parents might have been eager for him to leave Sarcophagus.

Ah. I am getting ahead of myself.

The Jedi Watchman Nuck Lyu of Esseles was the first of my peers to express some concern about Shykrill. Nuck Lyu had been instructing a group of Jedi, including Shykrill, in how to use the Force to throw a new bladed weapon of his own design at wooden targets. After the lesson was over, Nuck Lyu confided to me that Shykrill repeatedly hit his targets with extreme precision. I conveyed to Nuck Lyu that I was not surprised, as Shykrill was one of our most promising Jedi.

But Nuck Lyu said to me, "You do not understand. I designed the weapon, and it still took me nearly two months to throw it with consistent accuracy. Cope Shykrill's ability is not merely uncanny. It is unnatural."

Nuck Lyu returned to Esseles, leaving us with samples of his new blade, and leaving me with some inclination to pay closer attention to Shykrill, who was still training to be a Jedi Watchman himself. In the weeks that followed, I noticed no significant change in Shykrill's behavior. Then one night, I found him entertaining a trio of younger trainees—a Fia, a human, and a Nosaurian—with a shadowplay near

a campfire. Shykrill stood between the fire and a stone wall, using hand gestures to make lively silhouettes that told a story against the wall's surface. It was a very compelling tale about two brothers, one good and one bad. The good brother wanted to plant seeds and grow vegetables, but the bad brother wanted to eat all the seeds. Lending his voice to the narration, Shykrill made the good brother sound very noble and scholarly, and the bad brother sound like an illiterate oaf. The bad brother made the trainees laugh.

Now, you may have noticed by my hologrammic representation that I am unlike most common species, as I'm without appendages or a complex physiognomy. Although I had always believed that my natural condition did not in any way impede my abilities as a Jedi, I suddenly felt something I had never felt before as I watched Shykrill's hands flutter and dance and cast shadows.

Envy.

I wished I had hands so that I might tell such a story, too, with the skill and grace of the young Shykrill. And then I felt something else.

Shame.

Confused, I returned to my quarters to contemplate what had transpired, and to meditate. Twenty-three minutes later, my meditation was interrupted by the sound of screaming. The screaming attracted all the Jedi in our camp, and we raced to the area where I'd left Shykrill and his small audience. There we found Shykrill and two of the trainees lying on the ground, covered in blood. The third trainee, the Nosaurian, was standing amidst the bodies, gripping one of Nuck Lyu's weapons in his hands. It was the Nosaurian who was screaming, and it appeared that he had used the weapon's blade to slash the others. He bellowed, "The shadows are in my head! Get them out!" And then he slit his own throat and collapsed.



Our medics did what they could. The three trainees died. Only Shykrill survived.

The weeks passed. Shykrill was still in bandages when I encouraged him to join me for a constitutional. He did not seem puzzled or surprised when I brought him to the site where the trainees had perished. There I conveyed to him that I had witnessed part of his shadowplay, and that I had no idea he was such an accomplished storyteller. And with some boldness, I inquired if the shadows ever spoke to him.

He answered, "You know they speak to me. They spoke to you, too. I heard them. They made you wish you had hands of your own."

I asked him how long he had been listening to the shadows. He said, "If you want to know whether the shadows spoke to me before or after I became a Jedi, I can't say."

I asked if he controlled the shadows, or if they controlled him. He said, "The shadows and I are the two brothers. One wants to plant the seeds, one wants to eat the seeds."

Remembering his shadowplay, I asked him whether he was the good brother or the bad brother. He said, "I am the brother who lived. And now, it is time for you to join the shadows."

I suddenly realized that I felt quite cold. Dread flooded over me, and a sickness spread within, but these feelings ended with supreme quickness as Shykrill's head separated from his body, having met the honed edge of Nuck Lyu's blade. It was Nuck Lyu himself who'd thrown the weapon from his hiding spot, for I had summoned him from Esseles when we buried the trainees. Somehow, both of us instinctively knew that Shykrill was responsible for the trainees' deaths, and that the only way to end his evil ways was to end his very life.

I traveled to Sarcophagus to inform Shykrill's parents that their son was dead, allowing them to believe that he had died honorably. But yes, I had another motive for meeting the parents. I wanted to find out if the evil that seemed to possess Shykrill had preceded his recruitment to the Jedi. As delicately as I could, I inquired as to whether Shykrill had a brother. Indeed, I learned that they had had another son, but he had died three years before Cope was born. I asked if young Cope had ever talked to an imaginary friend, or if he had ever shared his shadow stories with them. The parents were polite, but seemed altogether baffled by these questions. And so I left them on their tombworld.

Just as the Force flows through us all, so do we all have aspects that are positive and negative. But a Jedi knows the difference between light, darkness, and the shadows in between. Jedi cannot wrestle with decisions or struggle to uphold our ideals. We must know that what we do is good and just, and should we make mistakes, we must rectify those mistakes.

What made Shykrill's innards so different, so wretched and weak, that he would yield to shadows, embrace them, let them overwhelm him? Why would he live amongst us for more than nine years, learn our ways and methods, only to eventually kill those unfortunate trainees? Did these shadows he spoke of come from within himself, and did they die with him, or do they continue to exist beyond his death? I do not know, and I have no desire to venture into the shadows where one might find the answers.

But I do know that we, the Jedi, must be better and stronger than killers of children. We must be more. It is not our purpose to understand such shadows, but it is our purpose to use our light to extinguish them.



**7786 bby**

**The Waymancy Storm**

<10.30.7786 BBY>

*Transcript of Chancellor Nagratha's remarks on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of Victory in the Waymancy Storm:*

Greetings, and my thanks to Chief Sergeant Sukko for his presence at today's service. Thank you to all the veterans present and to all those watching on your homeworlds. It was your sweat and courage that won the victory we now commemorate.

Victory in the Waymancy Storm has been celebrated every year since that solemn, glorious day 25 years removed. It will be remembered long after I have left office and long after all of our lives have passed into history.

Victory brought liberation to the brave settlers of the Rim, and those settlers have since brought new generations into the galaxy. Fresh-faced, hopeful faces that live lives untouched by war. They are our legacy. They are the legacy of every Republic soldier who fought, every Republic settler who resisted, and every life that was left behind on the battlefields. Those sacrifices will never be forgotten.

What did the Waymancy Storm mean to the Republic? More than any conflict before or since, the Waymancy Storm found us outmatched in the technology of war. Though we outnumbered our enemies a hundred to one, the frightful killing machines wielded by tyrants absent of conscience inflicted terrible losses in our ranks.

The mercenary army of Whirl-Point-Six carried cannons that spat out hailstorms of energy so thick they appeared as constant beams of fire. The armadas of the Wives of Tingrippa sailed arrogantly between the Rim's beacons, boasting that their weapons could puncture any Republic hull and that their shields could soak up any Republic counterattack.

As their onslaught continued, their bloodlust deepened. At Upper Brightday, 10 million settlers saw their lives extinguished as the land was put to the torch. The Republic defense of Barenth allowed a near-complete civilian evacuation at the cost of an entire battle group and its personnel, who never flinched in the face

of their duty. At Sooncanoo Beacon, the enemy massacred every crewmember of the Fortieth Flotilla when a bold gambit to boost their shields failed and left them dead in space.

War is never welcomed. Our Republic wasn't founded on blood, but on the principle of peace through cooperation. Yet this war was *necessary*. The Signatories of Waymancy had to be stopped. Some of their number believed in fanaticism, some believed in territorial cleansing, some believed in nothing at all beyond the cold logic of machinery. But the wholesale murder of settlers and their families? That could only be practiced by those who believed in evil.

Liberating the northern Rim was never in question. All Republic residents are equally valued, whether they make their homes on Coruscant or on Causito. After mourning our losses, we citizens rose up as one to deliver our response.

Our uniformed ranks swelled with determined volunteers. The factories of the Expansion Region churned out armored galleons and crawler mechs. Spies and codebreakers worked day and night to interpret an ocean of intercepted data – my mother was one of the Squill Sifters. And deep behind a security barrier in an Axum shipyard, technologists struggled to reverse-engineer the weapons and starship generators the Navy had captured at Sif-Alula.

For while we in the Republic possessed an unquenchable fighting spirit, our enemy had a cold, automated edge. After studying our technology for a thousand years inside the Waymancy Hollow, the Sisters of the Machinesmith had improved on our designs in nearly every way. Their ships could fly farther and faster. Their energy shields could withstand anything fired by our battleships. Their pulse-wave weapons packed a rapid-fire, armor-piercing punch whether mounted on a cruiser's hull or carried in the clawed fist of a Muzaran thug. No, we would never have given up. But without the scientific breakthroughs made on Axum, the cost in Republic lives would have been far greater.

And you did it. We — the Republic — did it. Armed with boosted pulse-wave carbines, the Republic rocket-jumpers routed the Neshtabine nest on Tantara. Bearing an experimental shield generator and a shimmering new energy skin, the cannonship *Squintpipe* threaded the enemy formation at Immalia, halting the orbital bombardment and sending the surviving ships scurrying for the jump beacon. Chief Sergeant Sukko was among those who scaled Mittoblade's

magnetic cliff, where he helped trigger the collapse of the Clowse Glowstack despite losing both legs to a Doshan raider.

In the end, we all know the story of the final Republic push and the atrocities unleashed by our enemies. But what we choose to remember is the story of the war as told through the soldiers who refused to desert their fortifications at Paig, or the fleet element that held the line at the Second Battle of Brightday. We remember the veterans who have gathered today, and whose brothers and sisters in arms have accompanied them in spirit.

We remember the ravaged worlds of the northern Rim that now thrive. Our shouts of triumph then echo in the cries of every baby born into a Rim family now. A hyperspace sinkhole is all that remains of the Waymancy bridal seat, and on a thousand Rim worlds the flag of the Republic flies high. A thousand more will join them, with a thousand more right on their heels. This is our reward, bought with service and sacrifice, with blood and hardship.

Today we salute those who earned that reward, and we honor the memories of those who have gone to their rest. In the name of the Republic, may peace reign eternal.

6,900 bby

## Ajunta Pall Recording

*To my descendants and those of my brethren . . . When you survey the greatness of our Sith Empire, you may find it pleasing to gaze down from the highest spires of our fortresses on Ziost, or to travel from one already conquered world to the next, receiving tribute from the subjects you inherited from your forefathers. But if you find yourself content to rule in this manner, I promise that your rule will be a short one. It is not enough to be powerful or mindful of the Force to survive. You must also be ambitious. And while you plan for future conquests, I urge you to examine the foundations of your fortresses, for these structures did not spring up from the ground on their own.*

*And for all the things you have and all that you covet, thank not just your forefathers. Thank the Jedi Knights, for it is because of them that you now enjoy our achievements.*

*It is likely you are aware of our long, terrible war with the Jedi Knights, which lasted more than a century. Yes, I was once a Jedi, a defender of the Republic, as were most of my brethren, but one must learn to crawl before learning to walk. Unfortunately, the Jedi have been walking on their treadmill of contentment for so long that most had forgotten what it was like to leap. When a cadre of more ambitious Jedi opened themselves to the dark side, they discovered the Force could be used to bend life itself . . . well, that was the leap we had to take.*

*So envious were the Jedi Knights of our ability to transform creatures into improved manifestations, they made it their ongoing duty to hunt us—the Dark Jedi—*

*wherever we attempted to experiment and practice our knowledge. It is regrettable that we could not persuade more of our persecutors to join us in darkness, and it was most disillusioning to be so overwhelmed on that mining world. Yes . . . yes, we were forced to surrender.*

*Predictably, our benevolent captors had not been able bring themselves to kill us directly, and so chose to remove us symbolically, purging our names and all evidence of our existence from galactic records. And so we were herded onto a drone starship and banished—without any weapons or navigational instruments of any kind—to this previously unexplored region of the Outer Rim. Yes, there was some slight satisfaction in that we left behind some of our precious Leviathans on Corbos, which should prove to be most inconvenient for future generations, but make no mistake: we had no reason to believe we would survive.*

*As our defenseless ship traveled into the uncharted space, guided only by the dark side, our thoughts were heavy with the losses we had suffered. But after our ship emerged from hyperspace, we soon arrived upon the world you know as Korriban. We were astonished to find that the native Sith were Force-sensitive. Certainly our so-called banishment was not the consequence of Jedi whim but the will of the Force.*

*The Sith attempted to terrify us with crude but imaginative illusions, some of which were reasonably impressive. Although we lacked weapons, we were obviously stronger and more intelligent than they, and yet they were still eager to prove themselves and prevent us from*

*appropriating their alchemical secrets. It was almost immediately clear that even their most talented sorcerers were no match for us, but they demonstrated honor when they yielded.*

*Eventually, all of the Sith—especially their Massassi warriors—lived only to serve their new masters. They really are amazingly malleable, the Massassi. New starships were constructed, weapons were fashioned, and more remarkable beasts were conceived. Although I personally prefer to rely upon the Force to create organic wonders, numerous offspring are living proof that the Massassi are biologically compatible with various members of my brethren.*

*And so we . . . we who were the fallen Jedi, the fallen become dark, the dark become exiles . . . we became Dark Lords of the Sith. The Jedi Knights intended to let us fall like a single raindrop into an endless desert, but they only sent us to a greater glory. While they decay in their stodgy trappings and power-inhibiting rules of conduct, we grow stronger every day. It is only a matter of time before we shall thank them in an appropriate manner.*

*Unfortunately, a few Sith Lords—I maintain they were too ambitious, for there is such a thing—were impatient to give thanks. They analyzed a nav computer from the ship that had brought us to Sith space, then reprogrammed it for a return trip through hyperspace. Obviously, I tried to discourage them. Even if they had retraced the same route, there was no way to calculate or even imagine whether the path had remained clear with the passage of time. With their newly gained knowledge of Sith alchemy and numerous weapons and warriors, they left Korriban despite my cautions. That was the last we saw or heard of them. Because so many years have transpired since their departure, it is reasonable to suspect that they neither accomplished their objective nor revealed our location to anyone in the Republic.*

*Will there be another confrontation with the Jedi? As I said, it is only a matter of time.*

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**5000bby**

### **The Sith Lords Chronicles**

#### **Part I: A Golden Age**

Time frame: 5,000 B.B.Y.

Period name: The Great Hyperspace War

It is a time of great expansion in the Old Republic. The JEDI KNIGHTS continue to shine a light of hope into the dark unexplored areas of the galaxy, and the mapping of hyperspace is encouraged and trade routes are discovered; many by intrepid explorers like plucky siblings GAV and JORI DARAGON, who plot uncharted courses in their ship Starbreaker 12. Meanwhile, on the far side of the galaxy, the Sith Empire has grown powerful through centuries of dark Force wielding and magic and the hundred-year rule of the greatest Dark Lord of the Sith, MARKA RAGNOS. The ruler's death leads to a power vacuum, and two leaders emerge at Ragnos' grave on the mausoleum planet of Korriban. After a bloody duel, NAGA SADOW and LUDO KRESSH's fight for destiny is interrupted with the unannounced arrival of Starbreaker 12, and the hapless Daragons are captured immediately.

Kressh believed the explorers to be a prelude to an invasion, while the cunning Sadow saw the Old Republic as a vast new empire to conquer. Despite the Sith Lords' death sentence on the Daragons, Sadow arranged for their escape, helped by his specially bred soldiers, the MASSASSI WARRIORS. Gav Daragon was drawn by Sadow to the Dark Side, while Kressh began to amass a force to crush Sadow, whom he suspected as the mastermind behind the prisoners' escape. Sadow was waiting, and crushed his rival's attack, ordering Jori Daragon to flee without her brother Gav. Seizing power, Sadow crowned himself Dark Lord of the Sith, and used the homing beacon he had planted on Starbreaker 12 to follow Jori back to the Republic's homeworlds.

Initially ignored, Jori eventually gained audience with the Empress of the Tetan primary world, who believed her stories and raised the alarm on Coruscant; however only a few Jedi listeners heeded her. The Great Hyperspace War began as Sadow's entire battle fleet appeared, and conflict spread across the Republic. The Sith were relentless, and despite Empress Teta's tactical superiority, and the heroics of alien Jedi ODAN-URR, the Republic forces were pushed back to the red-giant star Primus Goluud. When Sadow used Sith technology to destroy the star, his protege Gav Daragon turned against him. This betrayal rallied the Republic forces, who decisively routed the Sith Fleet. Sadow, now in full retreat, returned to the Sith Empire, where Ludo Kressh was waiting for him. Attacking these "traitors", both adversaries were surprised when Republic forces arrived in



the midst of this battle, and decimated both Sith sides in the ensuing crossfire. Most of the remaining Sith escaped with Sadow in his damaged flagship, and went to ground on a little-known jungle moon orbiting the gas giant Yavin. Here on YAVIN 4, Sadow drew on Sith technology and sorcery to cocoon himself in suspended animation until awakened at a future Golden Age.

### **Naga Sadow Recording**

*Ask me of my heritage, and I shall tell you. Ask me of my ambitions, and you shall know them. Ask me for my hand in battle, and I shall likely lend you both.*

*But ask me the secrets of Sith alchemy, and I would ask you for three measures of blood: one from a person you love, one from a person you hate, and one from yourself. A triangle do these measures form, and a powerful triangle it is, so long as your own bloodline is strong with dark side energy and not rife with foreign impurities. If your bloodline reveals that you are merely a spy or pretender to Sith knowledge, may my words reach out to tear your eyes and tongue from your head, and may you drown in your loved one's blood while your enemies look upon your wretched form and laugh.*

*Because you have not already succumbed to the defenses that guard this record, I will assume you have already prepared the triangle of blood. Now fill the triangle with the sacred words, and brace yourself for death.*

*You know the sacred words. Welcome, my apprentice. Yes, I shall grant you knowledge despite your imperfections, for you have passed my test, but barely.*

*As you are already aware, Sith alchemy gives one the power to alter the molecular composition of living beings and reshape inanimate matter. First, you will learn how to construct the equipment required to create such alterations. I will then teach you how to produce weapons and armor that are impervious to all others, and poisons that will convert the noblest of beings to your dark causes. Finally, you will create mutants steeped in the dark side and bound to your will.*

*Let us begin . . .*

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**4000 years BBY**

### **A Tale From The Dark Side**

The black obelisk seemed to absorb even the meager illumination shed by Krayiss Two's twin moons. A hooded figure took slow, perfectly measured steps toward the massive structure, keeping her hands hidden within the folds of her oversized robe.

"Taka zeech ma toka duuwaj." She muttered for the fourth time, precisely six heartbeats after her third intonation. Sith rites had to be followed with exacting care, for to abandon even one element of the prescribed procedure could spell doom for the uninitiated. And Vara Nreem did not wish to tempt the dark side by offering it an opening to exploit.

She took two more strides toward the obelisk, daring for a moment to glance at the perfect symmetry of its smooth face and the precise lines that marked its edges. *Such wicked beauty.* "Taka zeech ma toka duuwaj," she chanted for the fifth time -- or was it the fourth time? Her heart suddenly pumped, further distracting her. *Calm down.*

She measured the distance to the obelisk with her eye. About a dozen meters -- that had to make this the fifth time.

Having deduced the number of recitations, she held still and quiet for a moment, waiting to see if her stumble was enough to bring down the wrath of the dark side.

When nothing happened, she took the last two steps toward the Sith structure and issued the chant one final time. The obelisk continued to remain silent before her, as if ignoring her insignificant presence.

Entering the last section of the rite, she eased herself to her knees and pulled back the hood of her robe, allowing her light brown hair to spill across her shoulders and down her back. She clenched her hands into fists and placed them against her forehead, the base of her palms pressed together.



She remained in that position for what she guessed to be just over an hour when something happened -- something she sensed from both within and without.

A low rumble issued from deep within the hard ground, growing from a bare whisper to a deafening cacophony over the space of a dozen heartbeats. The land beneath her quivered, and then shook. Though her muscles ached from sitting for so long, she managed to maintain the position even as the ground tried to knock her down.

She glanced toward the obelisk, and though her vision jumped with each tremor, she thought she saw the massive stone moving, sliding upward, its base growing ever wider. The ground groaned and then cracked in a series of sharp fractures. Violent quakes erupted at the same time, the most powerful heave tossing Vara several meters to her right. She crashed on her side, and thought she felt a bone in her shoulder crack, but she ignored the pain and forced her head up so that she could watch the spectacle unfolding before her.

The obelisk itself had become nothing more than a spire atop a monstrous structure of angled walls and pyramidal towers. Vara recognized it from the ancient Sith writings as a library-temple, a place where sorcerers of pure Sith blood would come to meditate and to set down the knowledge they had gained from their experiments. A shiver gripped her body for a moment as she realized that she was standing at the foot of such a powerful place, an edifice that had witnessed the evolution of Sith techniques for accessing great dark side energies over dozens of millennia. How long had it been buried, its halls lifeless?

The ground quieted, and the silence of Krayiss Two's night cycle fell upon the land once more. Vara staggered to her feet, her right arm limp from the shoulder down, and stood before the Sith structure, staring at its beauty and sensing the black power that radiated from its every centimeter. She suddenly wondered whether she was hallucinating, but she dismissed the stray thought immediately. She could never have imagined what now lay before her, and her mind could therefore not have summoned it from the depths of her consciousness to fool her.

No, the temple was real. She could feel its imposing presence leering at her, measuring her. The chill of dark side power caressed her, and she knew that the spirits trapped inside the temple were deciding her worth.

She realized then that she had to prove herself to them, to demonstrate that she had the right to access the Sith powers lying in wait.

She stepped forward, and the gentle spirits' caress broke into a frenzy of energy motes, as if shocked by the unexpected move. Barely before she had time to notice the sudden change, the energy re-coalesced, wrapping itself about her once more.

She took another step forward, and elicited the same response. No more than six meters away stood the massive double-door that formed a tall trapezoid at the structure's base. Sith markings ran around the door's perimeter and along the seam in the middle. Though she couldn't read them, she knew that such engravings both warned intruders of certain death and acted as a receptacle for dark side power. Those who dared to penetrate the temple would be attacked by that stored energy -- and there was very little evidence to suggest that anyone had ever survived such a deluge of dark side power. Vara hoped that the spirits would judge her worthy and not cast their hatred down upon her.

She dared to move closer. This time the energy swarm erupted and reformed so quickly that Vara wasn't sure whether it had actually happened. *I guess I'll take that as a good sign.*

She came closer, and as she pierced the invisible barrier of energy radiated by the library-temple she felt her heart flutter, its rhythm suddenly interrupted by the plane of ionization. Vara had read of such defensive shields, but none that allowed an intruder to pass through. It seemed that the spirits had accepted her right to enter -- She heard a faint call, like someone had whispered her name in a rush of cold air. "Vara Nreem ... "

Her body tensed, and she glanced around to see who had spoken. Seeing no one, she turned her attention back to the double-door, and there stood a translucent, shadowy figure, its head adorned by a crown of spikes and its body enveloped by a voluminous robe. She could make out its features only because they were different shades of black, the eyes and mouth the darkest of all.

She stopped herself from involuntarily staggering backward at the sight of the specter, for she knew that a display of fear would only decrease her chances of surviving an encounter with a Sith spirit.

Apparently satisfied with his effect on her, the shadow spoke. "Vara Nreem you have awakened us from our ten-thousand-year slumber." The voice hovered just above the lowest register Vara believed her senses could perceive. "Do you believe you can truly defeat us this time?"

Vara swallowed the saliva that had collected in her mouth and throat. "I... have come for knowledge, not for battle." Her own voice sounded brassy and high as it followed in the wake of the specter's deep timbre.

"You are a Jedi," he stated, as if that simple sentence held volumes more than its surface meaning would suggest.

Vara considered. She had to maneuver the conversation just so if she wished to accomplish her goals. "If by that you mean that I am a believer in the Force, and that I have learned to manipulate it at my will, then yes, that is what I am." She straightened up as she spoke, intending to present herself as an immovable and impervious object. "But I do not believe in this distinction between the dark and the light. To me they are but one and the same. And I have come to complete my learning by mastering the techniques of the Sith methods for using the Force -- not the dark side of the Force -- just the Force."

The spirit raised its head slightly as if summoning long-dormant memories or receiving information from some invisible source. Vara's breathing had begun to speed up, and she did her best to mask her nervousness, for to allow the specter to see such weakness would be the last mistake she would ever make.

The spirit returned its gaze to her. "We are... puzzled by this perspective. How did you come to this conclusion?"

"By many years of reasoning and meditation," she said, more confident now that she had already succeeded in confusing the Sith by her words. "The light and dark sides are but aspects of the Force. The Jedi have always sought to show the barrier between the two -- but it does not exist. The line blurs. All that can be relied upon then is the source of these two aspects, for it -- the Force -- depends on the existence of nothing, unlike the light, which would not exist without the dark. The Force just *is*. And therefore, worrying about its subdivisions does not matter."

The Sith did not respond, leaving the silence to speak for him. Vara began to wonder whether she had taken her ruse too far--

The specter laughed, a booming outburst like the rumbling of stone grinding against stone. "Your logic is faulty, Jedi. Did you think that your masquerade would allow you to enter our abode, to steal our secrets? *We* allowed you to find us. We allowed you to call us from the depths of this world. And it is we who will determine the consequences of your attempted deception."

Vara could not help shrinking back, feeling for the lightsaber tucked into her robes.

"Did you think us charlatans? Do you even know what power we possess? By your actions, I would have to say not." The Sith seemed to grow, its shadowy form stealing away more and more of the surrounding emptiness. "Other Jedi have come here before you. Do not think you are the first, or will be the last. Perhaps you would like to see some of those who have failed in this same endeavor."

With a wave of its arm, the Sith summoned three additional specters. But these did not possess the same black form. These were faded gray figures, their faces contorted as if in tremendous pain. But even in their spectral form, Vara could tell they were Jedi Masters. And if the Sith could do that to a Master ...

She jabbed her hand into her robe and yanked out her lightsaber, igniting it before she even had a firm grasp on the hilt. The blade hummed to vibrant life, and she held it in front of her, its tip pointed toward the lower-lying of the two moons which hung in the sky just above the temple's obelisk-spire.

The Sith shadow focused on her again, and then suddenly swooped forward.

Vara swung her lightsaber around in a wide arc, slicing the specter from its left shoulder to its right hip. But the blade passed through without leaving so much as a mark --

And then the spirit was upon her. It wrapped its shadowy form around her, rendering her visual sense useless and at the same time burning her skin with a cold fire. She screamed and slashed violently with her lightsaber. But the specter's attack only intensified; her body went numb from the pain as the dark side fire penetrated her corporeal shell and assaulted her spirit.

The end came swiftly and Vara found herself merely a bleached shadow of her former self surrounded by dark side power. And the realization that she would remain in torment for eternity swept over her like a shadow. *I cannot believe what I have done. I only wish I had a way to warn those who come after me not to underestimate the power of the dark side...*

## **Tales Of The Jedi Companion Vignettes (1996)**

"Perverted, twisted lies," Queen Amanoa said, her words saturated with disgust.

The prisoner before her managed to struggle to his feet for the third time. Only with considerable effort did he raise his head to glare at her. "You ... *you* are the darkness!" he screamed in a ruined voice. "Iziz will fall. It cannot withstand the pressure of this heavy shadow for much longer."

Amanoa could not suppress her anger any longer, and she swept to her feet in one fluid motion, her violet-and-black cloak spreading out behind her in a flourish. She stopped at the edge of the throne's raised dais and stared down at the pitiful man. As if to taunt her even further, the prisoner refused to so much as flinch at her sudden movement.

Her rage flared. "Blasphemer! Do you honestly believe I will hesitate to cast you outside these walls? Do not think the knowledge you possess is worth more than your life." The tone of her voice fell. "Why prolong your agony? There are others who will perform the same task I require of you."

The half-dead man locked his gaze with hers. "Then go and find them."

Amanoa whirled, her scream choked to a muffled growl by her constricted vocal cords. She forced in a deep breath and then exhaled noisily, but her wild anger did not subside.

She turned on the man again, raising one hand as if she were holding a delicate crystal sphere in her palm. Suddenly a green brilliance flared from the pale skin of her hand, forming a ball of crackling, swirling energy. "You have run out of chances, Olis. And expelling you into the wilds is too good for you."

Her arm swept down in a wide arc and she hurled the glowing sphere with a strength that belied her otherwise frail stature. The radiant ball struck Olis square in the chest, launching him backward a half-dozen meters to crumple to the floor in a sickening, wet crunch of bone snapping within flesh.

Her anger satisfied for the moment, Amanoa straightened her robe and called to one of the guards stationed at the throne room's entrance. "Take this away." she said, indicating the dead prisoner with a disinterested flick of her wrist.

"At your request, my queen."

Amanoa slipped back into her large, imposing throne and watched the guard remove the refuse. "And be quick about it," she said, "we're having visitors."

She turned to one of her attendants. "Tell Novar to bring the three Jedi to the throne room at once."

\*\*\*\*

Deep in the twisting passageways of Onderon's undercity, in a domed chamber carved from the red-streaked gray stone of the world's crust, the initiates gathered. Luxurious black robes enshrouded the neophytes as if a sea of shadow had overflowed the confines of their dark hearts.

The leader of the procession motioned for the others to spread out into a ring around a raised central dais, upon which stood a wooden table carved into the image of a mythological Onderonian giant. The creature's corded muscles bulged under the strain of the large disk that acted as the table's top.

The initiates did as they were instructed, eliciting no sound other than the gentle swish of their robes as they moved about the chamber. Once they had settled into their positions, the leader ascended a narrow, five-step staircase to the floor of the dais, and placed a pyramidal construct engraved with thousands of tiny designs onto the table. He stepped back, lowering the cowl of his robe as he did so, and bowed his head toward the Holocron.

"We come to hear the words of the Sith ... to learn of the dark ways ... to become one with the dark side," he said in a flat voice that did not waver in tone, pitch, or volume

.

For a moment, the chamber remained silent. Not even a whisper of passing air or a creak of settling rock dared disturb the sanctity of the ceremony. Then a sound like an engaging repulsorlift engine grew from the nothingness, swelling to fill the cave-chamber's massive volume. None of the assembled figures moved, for they had all experienced the Holocron's wondrous awakening before.

From the top of the pyramid spilled a stream of blue-green translucent mist that formed into a slowly shifting cloud and then quickly into a silhouette of a warrior clad in spiked armor and wearing a silver circlet atop his head. Slowly the details filled in, and the Sith warrior-king stood like a giant amidst a gathering of insects, more because of his powerful presence than because

of his albeit impressive stature. His eyes focused on the man who had summoned him.

"Novar," he said in his thick accent, the syllables oozing out like dacha-syrup. "Why have you disturbed me?"

Novar raised his head to address the Holocron's dark side gatekeeper. "King Adas, we are ready for your wisdom. Please instruct us in the ways of the Sith."

Adas contemplated. "You believe these initiates are worthy?" He snorted in derision as he surveyed the ring of robed onlookers. "I do not waste my teachings on the weak."

Novar straightened himself, giving the illusion of confidence - though his mind screamed at him to run away. Adas preyed on the timid and weak-willed, and although Novar had never heard of a Holocron gatekeeper affecting the world around it, he did not doubt that Adas could find a way.

"These are the best of our ranks," Novar said, motioning grandly in the direction of the initiates. "They have fulfilled the requirements necessary to advance to the next level, and they are all ready and willing to offer their lives to the dark side. They have earned the right to practice the Sith ways."

Adas listened without changing his expression or otherwise indicating his thoughts. After a short but uncomfortable silence he said, "I will teach them. But know this, Novar. If any of these neophytes fails me in any way, I will find a way to take it out on you."

It took a moment for Novar to fully absorb the statement, and another to calm himself enough to respond. "I accept the responsibility." After all, he thought, he had mastered the fundamentals of Sith sorcery. What could Adas possibly do to him?

A whisper from somewhere in the back of his mind slithered up to the forefront. *You do not want to know.*

\*\*\*\*

"Good," the wispy image of Freedon Nadd hissed, the sibilance slicing through the undercity's maze of passageways.

King Ommin concentrated harder, bolstered by his mentor's praise. He could indeed reel the subtle ebbs and flows of the thronging masses in the city above. just as Nadd had said. As he continued to absorb the sensations of millions of beings engrossed in their daily activities, he began to notice tiny pinpricks of violence and hatred erupting randomly across the whole of Iziz. The dark outbursts called to him, drew his thoughts near, asked him for reinforcement.

Ommin felt a wave of power rush through him, felt the dark side intertwine with his own essence, and he knew then that he could command the Force to do as he willed. His hands gripped his throne's knobbed armrests tighter and he plunged deep into himself, losing his corporeal existence to embrace his metaphysical. The world about him quickly faded into a misty coalescence, giving him the slight disconcerting feeling of being disconnected. But the emotion lingered for only a moment before he brushed it aside and focused on his current ambition.

He surged forward, delving deeper into himself, until he came to what he could only describe as a barrier. It seemed to ripple as if constructed of gossamer, and yet it possessed a strength of a tempered steel alloy.

Ommin paused before the barricade, suddenly unsure.

"Weakling!" Nadd spat from the periphery of Ommin's consciousness. "You will never reach your potential if you falter at the slightest obstacle. Beyond that wall lies your destiny. Beyond that wall lies the full power of the dark side. If you do not have the strength to reach it, then you do not deserve to become a Sith sorcerer!"

Ommin's anger flared. He'd come so far in so short a time, and yet Nadd expected more - more than any Onderonian could possibly offer. Had Ommin's ancestors penetrated the Force so quickly? And if they had, how could they have survived? The dark side offered much, but stole away more. Ommin did not know if he could give that much of himself.

Nadd's voice rose up once more. "Your doubt will be your downfall, Ommin."

This time the words held an air of seduction, a warm, inviting tone that Ommin felt inexplicably drawn to. "You are ready. There is nothing to fear." The hiss of



Nadd's voice seemed to swirl about his mind, settling somewhere to the side, both within and without of the confines of Ommin's consciousness.

"Strike now!" Nadd shouted suddenly. "Come to the dark side now, when it calls, or you will have failed. The dark side will forever shun you, the weak-minded fool who believed he had the right to wield its power!"

Ommin had sacrificed more than he had thought he ever would in his quest to make the dark side his ally. And now all of his efforts hung on a single moment, his once chance to prove his worthiness, as if all he had done before meant nothing. The dark side had torn away so much of his life. He could not let it slip from his grasp, laughing at how it had pillaged him and left him nothing more than a broken husk bereft of its life essence. He could not let that happen.

His anger became both his weapon and his armor as he bludgeoned the barrier before him. The wall rippled wildly under the attack, but did not give way. Ommin redoubled his effort, pulled the hatred of everything - including the dark side - from the depths of his soul, channeling it into his blows. Then suddenly the wall ripped open. Before Ommin could react, he was sucked through, carried by a force more powerful than he could have ever imagined. The dark side immediately flooded his being, becoming one with every cell in his body.

The image of the city above returned to him then, and he assaulted the pinpricks of evil scattered across cityscape with flares of dark side energy. The already vile incidents instantly grew worse, the individuals involved momentarily filled with a foreign hatred.

Ommin watched in both awe and horror. He realized then that he was invincible with the dark side at his back. Nothing could topple him. Nothing could harm or destroy him ever again, not even the dark side itself.

His normal vision returned, and he saw the ghostly form of Freedon Nadd hovering close by. Ommin felt stronger than he ever had, and he wanted to show his mentor what he had accomplished.

He pushed himself up from his ancient throne, and then collapsed under his own weight, his legs no longer able to support him.

Nadd made a deep, staccato sound that Ommin could only guess was laughter. "The dark side does not come without its price," the Sith spirit said. "You have power over the Force, but in exchange you have lost power over your own body."

Nadd had warned him of the dark side's initiation tithe a decade ago when his training had begun. He couldn't remember whether he had chosen to accept that price or whether he had purposely sealed it away in the recesses of his memory. It didn't matter now, anyway. He had finally reached his goal -the dark side belonged to him.

Unfortunately, he belonged to the dark side as well.

\*\*\*\*

Steam rose in wispy clouds from the fiery forge set in the center of the immense underground chamber. The mixed scent of sulfur and sweat permeated the air, and flares of superheated gases randomly struck out from the Sith-spawned flames that kept the apparatus alive.

But Shas Dvos ignored the violent sensations that assaulted his nerve endings. The work before him absorbed all of his attention. He did not even realize that four days had passed since his effort had begun. All that mattered - all that had ever mattered - was the completion of his undertaking.

It had taken him years to decipher the Sith tome he had stolen from the ancient dark side holdfast hidden in the wilds of his native planet. The book at once fascinated and reviled him, but his obsession quickly overpowered his fear and he eventually lost interest in all other aspects of his life. His desired nothing more than to unlock the Sith secrets hidden with the paper and ink of the millennia-old tome.

Now, more than a decade after discovering the book, he was about to fulfill what he had come to see as his destiny. His hammer rang out in perfect pitch as it struck the quickly cooling steel, spraying bright red sparks into the darkness. Any onlooker might have considered the event a spectacle of beauty, but Shas saw none of it, so transfixed was he by the object of his toils. The breastplate - all of the individual pieces that made up the suit of armor for that matter required the perfect blend of craftsmanship and Sith magic. A mixture

biased in either direction would result in failure, as Shas had learned more times than he cared to recount.

The hammer pounded one more time against the steel, this last strike seeming to echo through the chamber and out into its tributary passages unlike any blow that had come before. Shas stopped and stared, sweat trickling down his face and chest. Outside stimuli began to intrude on his concentration, but he effortlessly thrust them back into the background. The hammer fell from his hand and chimed a final time as it collided with the stone floor. The armor was complete.

Shas did not know how long he stood captivated by his creation. It might have been minutes, but it also might have been hours or even days. He wrestled with several emotions at once, each quickly reshaping into the next, until he returned to the beginning and started the cycle again. Had he really succeeded after all these years? Surely he didn't hold that kind of power over the Sith magic. And yet before him lay the armor, perfect in every detail. But did he deserve to wear it? Wouldn't such a construction be wasted on him, a man who had had to steal the sorcery necessary to create it?

No, another voice within him spoke. If he had not rescued the Sith knowledge from the obscurity of his world's wild regions, the armor would never have been brought into being. If anyone deserved to don the exquisite suit, to surround himself with its innate power, it was Shas Dovos.

"Yes, you shall wear the armor," came a voice from the darkness.

Shas spun about, jarred from his musings. "Who's there?" he demanded.

Across the chamber an ember seemed to hover a dozen feet above the floor. It pulsed every few moments, flaring yellow and then resuming a stable red hue in turn. "You know who I am. Without me you never could have understood the book, much less created the armor. At first your arrogance annoyed me, but eventually I saw how I could put it to use."

The ember exploded in a bright flash and Shas had to shield his eyes. When the light had died, he dared to look again. Before him stood the translucent form of an alien species he did not recognize, that it appeared to be near-human. It wore long robes, the cowl turned down to reveal its fierce countenance.

Shas's heart fluttered and he felt himself take a stepbackward. "Who ... who - "

"I am the protector of that tome you so casually call your own. I am its guardian against the ravages of time. Without me that collection of frail molecules would have crumbled into dust a thousand years ago."

The spirit stepped-no, flowed -forward, gaining in bulk and stature as it neared Shas. "It is I who decide who is worthy to discover this lore. It is I who decide how the knowledge will be used. And you have done exactly as I have commanded."

Dozens of divergent thoughts clambered to win Shas's attention, but each was quickly surmounted by the next, and Shas could not concentrate at all. Fear predominated his emotions now, his curiosity lost, his arrogance vanquished.

He staggered backward as the spirit seemed to expand rather than to merely move toward him. "And now that I have allowed you the honor of creating the armor, you must perform a service for me."

Shas cringed at the words. Whatever the book's protectorwanted Shas knew it would somehow spell his doom.

"Not your doom, Shas. No, it is as I have always told you in your deep dreams - this is your destiny." The specter fell into a round of reverberating laughter.

Shas glanced toward the half-dozen exits from the chamber, but all seemed too far away. If the spirit did not want him to leave, it would not let him. And Shas did not have any desire to know how it would accomplish that feat.

"Do not worry, my disciple. You will have your place in the historyofthe galaxy. I did not bring you this far to end your albeit insignificant existence now. No, you will become an extension of me. You will go where I cannot and help restore the glory of the Sith."

Shas felt his curiosity returning, though his fear did not subside.

"But before I teach you the skills you will need to succeed in your mission, I must make you stronger." The spirit looked toward the suit of armor which sat in a heap at the base of the lorge. "This," it said, gesturing, "will be your new skin."

At first Shas was confused, but the realization came all too quickly.

"And this new being that the merging of man and metal will create most definitely deserves a new name. I think 'Warb Null' will do nicely."

Shas threw up his hands in defense and screamed in horror as the specter swooped toward

### **Master Thon Recording**

*Why do scholars use the outcome of battles to indicate significant moments in history? Is not every moment significant in some way?*

*Why do analysts collect data about wars, counting the dead and wounded, and surveying the structures that survive? Do they really believe that if they collate such information, others will better understand why such events take place, and future wars might be prevented?*

*Then why—even now, as I write this—are so-called intelligent beings dominating and slaughtering others? Why are weapons still readied before peace is considered? Why are so many prepared to kill to achieve power, claim property, or prove that their gods are true?*

*The answer is simple: beings fight because they can, and sometimes because they must; sometimes by choice, but not always.*

*So long as there is life, there will be wars. Even the smallest insects can have their armies.*

*It is not the way of the Jedi to start wars.*

*It is the way of the Jedi to end wars, and to be aware that this duty is one that never ends.*

*Jedi battle meditation requires more from a Jedi than other disciplines. It can be most exhausting, and becomes even more challenging with the arrival of unexpected reinforcements for the opposition. But when it works, it works wonders.*

*If a Jedi's talent is measured by the ability to end battles without activating a lightsaber, then Jedi battle meditation must be counted among the most worthy of skills.*

### **Light and Shadow**

"The Jedi who fall are the most dangerous of all." - line from a children's rhyme

Dray watched the bright red star disappear into the darkness of the horizon. His thoughts were a jumbled mass, and as the sun vanished so did his hope of untangling those chaotic feelings... It was always worse at night, when he had

nothing to do but stare up at the endless expanse of black sky and consider his plight.

He had come to this world at the edge of the Galactic Frontier to try and salvage his very soul. The Republic's Astrogation Survey Team had yet to explore the planet, so it had no designation. Since he made the discovery, Dray figured he should also give his new home a name... He called it Vigil.

At first, the verdant forest planet seemed like a perfect place for introspection and healing. However, its pastoral beauty only caused Dray more pain as he came to a terrible realization. The idyllic serenity of the environment served as a daily reminder that such tranquillity would never again be his... In the past, Dray had been the master of his emotions, but peace was now merely a fleeting dream.

He fled civilized space in order to escape his troubles. But there was never any escape, no matter where he went... Not even on Vigil.

Dray often contemplated leaving, but to go where? He would merely be hunted down as he was before, and Dray was tired of running. So he remained on the planet - both his paradise and perdition....

\* \* \*

He stretched out a tentative hand, like an infant reaching for its mother. Almost immediately he experienced the tingling sensation of the Force surging around his fingertips. A small chill touched the base of his spine with the knowing caress of an old lover.

Dray sighed and rested himself in the small clearing under a canopy of wide-leaf arcosia trees. The delicately sweet smell of the foliage drifted through his nostrils and he drank in the aroma.

Sitting cross-legged with his hands folded across his lap, Dray closed his eyes. The scent of arcosia swept into his lungs. He quieted himself down until all that remained was the sound of his own breath.

Dray opened himself up to the harmony of nature... The shrill calls of the prismwings taking flight conjured up a breathtaking image of the brightly colored birds streaking a rainbow through the sky. He concentrated on distinguishing between the soft hoots of the other avians, the snuffling cries resounding from a hundred species of animals, and the tinny warbles of the bewildering array of insects.

His breathing became slower, more exact, falling into an almost lulling rhythm. Dray tried to remember the meditative exercises taught to him by his Master, Ven-Mah Tyrrahl. He had not been able to call upon them in a very long time.

Since...

A sharp pain nearly cut through his concentration, twisting like a vibroblade in his gut.

He would never forget that day.

His meditation had come to an abrupt end when Yeres Threem burst into the botanical garden. The Vultan Jedi adept was demanding answers and Dray had none to give his friend.

Dray's face twitched as he relived the awful moment.

Threem was beyond reason, attempting to kill Dray, but that hardly mattered. Threem knew the truth and therefore had to die.

For what? a familiar voice demanded to know. Dray could not identify it, so for the moment he ignored it.

Dray could still hear the clash of their lightsabers, feel the haft of his weapon vibrate in his hand, smell the horrid cauterization of flesh.

Then he was standing over the body of one of his closest friends. Dray could still see the terrible, empty look on the Vultan's face. Those dark eyes like dull transparisteel accusing Dray of betrayal long after Threem had stopped breathing.

It was the first Jedi that Dray had killed. It would not be the last...

Other memories began to flood his mind, threatening to disrupt his contemplation. Dray took a cleansing breath, let go his focus, cleared his thoughts.

He tried again and suddenly heard the words of his Master echoing through his head.

Try and you will always fail. Success is not a goal. It is a conscious decision.

Dray increased his concentration.

The characteristic sounds of his adopted planet fell away as he searched for something else. Sweat beaded on his forehead, matting his hair, and dripping down his back in icy rivulets. He released his awareness of the physical body and grasped for something greater.

For a moment Dray feared the ability was lost to him... No... Wait.

There.

He heard it, hushed at first but growing ever stronger. The heartbeat of his new home... The resonant geothermal pulse that warmed the cold rock.

Dray slowly timed his own heartbeat to Vigil's, and they became as one. The crude vessel of the body could no longer contain his spirit. Dray did not fully abandon his physical form, but embraced it into the whole of his being and moved beyond. Into nature. He was the rocks, the trees, the animals, the lakes, the dirt. The world.

It was not enough.

He reached for the stars above, into the galaxy that surrounded him.

Into the very heart of the Force.

He felt his entire conscious being lifted into a place that words could never describe. His body was engulfed in flame and then dipped into a vast ocean of ice. He continued to rise, and as he did he felt his mind begin to open. It could not fully encompass what he was experiencing, but he knew he was about to reach a plateau. The most beautiful woman in the galaxy was wrapping him in her arms and pulling him higher and higher.



Something abruptly stopped his ascension.

He heard the rumblings first, the terrible thunder emanating from great stormclouds clearing the horizon. Then came the lightning, unnaturally violet and unerringly vicious. The winds roared with fury and nothing could stand against them.

The great storm tore at the land mercilessly, striking at Dray's own heart. The sky that had borne him aloft suddenly released him. Dray found himself falling...

Falling.

A coldness like he had never felt swept over him, chilling his breath even in the temperate clime of Vigil's forests.

The storm was coming for him; fueled by fear, rage, hatred. Dray braced himself, but knew there was no hope of surviving the onslaught.

Then came thunder like no other and Dray thought it was the first strike of the dark side storm. The anticipated attack never arrived and Dray realized the jarring sound was not a manifestation of the Force after all.

It was reality...

His eyes snapped open and the trance was lost. The dreadful storm was gone as quickly as it had arrived.

Dray immediately saw the streaking arc of light cutting through the sky; like a falling star only much closer. Whatever the object was it had just entered the atmosphere, burning as bright as any sun.

It seemed to take forever to complete its descent. The flaring object disappeared momentarily behind the tree line and Dray felt the coldness of a metallic craft sheltering three lifeforms. He could feel the vital pulse of each being and for an awful moment, their emotions were also his to experience - fear, hopelessness, despair. A familiar tingle rippled down Dray's body as the dark side began to feed...

Suddenly, there was an explosion so great Dray felt it from over a mile away. The ground shook as if wracked by a rampaging herd of angry bantha. Dray lost his footing and rode the rest of the aftershocks flat on his back.

All was silent once more.

Dray was already up and running.

\* \* \*

He stumbled through the last few meters of tangled underbrush, nearly landing head-first in the impact trench that stretched across the valley.

Dray followed the track, running parallel to it, and estimated the size of the ship that may have caused the sizable furrow. His heart triphammered inside his chest as he closed in on the unnatural crater that yawned like an open wound.

He skidded to a halt at the lip of the smoldering abyss and surveyed the situation. The vessel was some sort of scout craft; too small to be a freighter and not enough armor or weapons to be a fighter. The ship had split into two large sections and each half was a raging inferno.

Dray slowly descended the dirt mound and moved toward the fiery remains, keeping one arm protectively over his face. He made his way over the minefield of flaming debris to what he guessed was the cockpit. He could see two bodies completely engulfed. For their sake, Dray hoped they died on impact.

As sweat poured off him like rain, he carefully began moving away from the blazing inferno.

He wasn't sure what stopped him... Whether it was a slight tremor in the Force or a faint plaintive cry. Maybe it was neither; just his imagination riled by his failed attempt at a meditative trance.

Whatever the cause, something drew him back to the downed craft. He stepped closer to the other half of the broken ship and peered into the conflagration. That's when he saw her, a young girl no more than seven years old. Her blond hair was soaked with perspiration, her eyes wild with fear. The girl's mouth moved again and again, though Dray couldn't make out what she was saying.

He could get no closer than a few meters because of the raging wall of fire. The girl could not come to him, her right leg was trapped under a large cylindrical power coupler.

"Can you hear me?" Dray called to her.

The girl did not answer him. All of her attention was focused on the cockpit. "Mommy! Daddy!" Tears rolled down her cheeks as she cried out again. "Help me!"

"I'm trying," Dray said under his breath. He waved his arms at her, hoping her eyes would at least track the motion. "Look at me, princess!"

She finally did. The girl was struggling to free her leg, but succeeding only in getting the limb wedged further.

"Listen, don't try to move, okay?"

Time was slipping away quickly, as measured by the metallic groans of the ship's superstructure as it tried to hold itself together. It was a futile battle against a relentless foe.

Dray had to make a decision and quickly. "I'm going to help you. Just hang on..."

He cleared his mind and concentrated on the fiery barrier that stood between himself and the girl. Holding his arms in front of him, Dray started forward like a sleepwalker stumbling through a dream.

Sensing a new victim, the flames licked at his hands, his face, his clothing. But Dray did not feel the blazing tendrils trying to coil around him. His entire body shimmered as he absorbed the intense heat and walked through the boiling barrier as if it were a waterfall.

Dray emerged unscathed on the other side, in the broken aft of the ship. The girl was staring at him now with perceptive hazel pupils. The fear had vanished, replaced by confusion.

He prepared to manipulate the Force again, this time to lift the heavy cylinder off the girl's leg. Dray wasn't sure why, but instead found himself reaching down to grasp the heavy machinery. He bent his legs and lifted for all he was worth. The cylinder screeched in annoyance at being disturbed, reluctant to release its grip, but with a final grunt of exertion Dray managed to free the girl from her make-shift prison.

As Dray quickly wiped the sweat from his forehead, he considered his actions. The first method would have been easier, but an unnecessary reliance on the Force to do something just as easily accomplished with a little sweat. He had a sudden fleeting image of depraved Sith overlords sitting on their thrones, using the Force to attend to their every insignificant need. Some were so bloated from years of inactivity their limbs had all but atrophied.

A shrill whine from above banished the disturbing imagery from Dray's mind. The roof of the craft was about to give way and land on their heads.

Dray carefully scooped up the girl in his arms, surprised by how little she weighed. He pressed her small face against the front of his sweat-soaked tunic. Turning away from the expanding heart of the blaze, Dray gathered the Force to shield them both from the smothering heat.

Building up a head of speed, Dray lunged clear of the sizzling mess... Just as the scorched metal finally collapsed into itself. His thighs ached from the strain of keeping his body balanced as it ascended the steep pit, but his arms were otherwise occupied.

Dray continued running in order to escape the lingering clouds of acrid smoke drifting lazily from the abyss. His legs gave way soon after and he stumbled to his knees. He placed the girl down on the cool grass and felt his chest heaving. Dray had inhaled more than his share of the foul fumes and his body thudded to the ground, wracked by a violent coughing spasm.

After what seemed to be an eternity, Dray finally took a cleansing breath. He greedily drank in another, then another until his respiration was once again a process free of pain.

Dray checked on the little girl and to his surprise found her staring right at him. He unconsciously shuddered... No, more like she was looking through him.

Those blue-green eyes, wise beyond their tender years, drilled into him like a plasma cutter. "I think you're evil," she said matter-of-factly. "Usually I can tell, but not with you..." She paused for a moment, then frowned. "You saved me. How come?"

Dray's mouth opened and then closed as a million thoughts battled for dominance in his head.

The girl abruptly turned away, staring back the flaming wreckage. "I'm doing it again. My momma says sometimes I ask too many questions and hurt people's feelings." For the first time she actually sounded like a frightened child. "She's dead now. So is my daddy."

The girl looked back over at him, tears pouring from her eyes. Before he knew it her small hands were wrapped around him and his tunic was wet with her sobs. Dray felt her tiny body shuddering uncontrollably against him and suddenly he had difficulty swallowing as his throat tightened in sympathy. He took in a long breath through his nose, quelling his surging emotions.

Dray desperately wanted to tell her everything would be okay, but could not. That would be a terrible lie. "I'm sorry," he whispered, but the comforting words sounded hollow in his own ears. They could never be enough to ease such tremendous pain. "I'm sorry," he said again and held her tightly until she was all cried out.

\* \* \*

Dray wasn't sure when she finally fell asleep, but he was near exhaustion as he carried her back to his camp site. He sat a few feet away watching her curled up in his bedroll, sleeping soundly considering the nightmare she had just survived. Before he knew it, dawn had crept over his shoulder.

The sentry duty wasn't really necessary - there weren't any predators on Vigil that could pose much of a threat to him - but he performed it anyway.

As he kept watch over the girl, Dray realized why the girl had such an odd affectation about her... There was a great concentration of the Force held within that small frame, yet so untamed and unharnessed he didn't quite sense at first. But now... Now he could not help but feel it, drawing him like a homing beacon.

An idea struck him and he acted upon it before he could even debate the merits or flaws. He focused on the sleeping form in front of him, summoning up his considerable abilities. As gently as he could Dray reached out to her mind, trying

to open her thoughts to him. Tentatively he began to probe the girl's consciousness, a normally slow process made almost interminable due to his circumspect manner.

Bracing himself, Dray prepared to enter her deep subconscious. That was where a Force-sensitive being maintained a protective barrier that would prevent another Force wielder from penetrating his or her inner mind. This powerful 'shield' violently pushed back such an intruder... The stronger the push, the greater the being's strength in the Force. It was a technique often used by Jedi Masters to sense the potential of their students.

Dray centered himself and stepped across the threshold...

It was as if someone had shot him out of a proton torpedo launcher, straight into the heart of a supernova.

Dray let out a scream so high-pitched his own ears could barely hear it as he was flung through the verdant forests of Vigil. He cut a green swathe through the underbrush, his body smashing tree branches to splinters. His stomach heaved as his flight lasted impossibly long before coming to a jarring end in a small lake. Dray landed with a hearty splash in the icy water... Nearly half a mile away from his camp.

He floated there in the water, contemplating what he had just experienced. He wasn't sure how much time had passed before he noticed the girl standing at the edge of the lake. Her hair was a morning jumble and she stifled a yawn with a hand as she stared at him in bewilderment. "Are you okay?"

Dray's head was pounding hard, the rhythm beating out a single word that played in his mind over and over.

"Incredible."

\* \* \*

"What's your name?" he asked her over lunch. It wasn't the most nutritious meal, but he had very little left in the way of prepackaged 'healthy' rations. He did his best to offer her a good mix of berries, meat, and an assortment of desiccated victuals ready-to-eat. Those little silver bags, stamped with the seal of the Republic, were the bane of every soldier but would always do in a pinch.

"Nova," she finally replied. "My name is Nova."

"That's very pretty." He smiled at her, but she kept a neutral expression.

"Thank you." She chewed thoughtfully on a trangolo berry. "I like this place. It reminds me of my aunt's garden. Only bigger." Her eyes wandered for a moment before settling on him. "Why are you here?"

"You know, you can call me Lian if you'd like."

She nodded and said: "Did you come here because of your heart?"

Dray arched an eyebrow, studying the girl. "My heart?"

"I can feel it. I think it weighs more than my daddy's ship." A shadow passed across her face for a moment and Dray thought she was about to start sobbing again. Surprisingly, she did not. "That's why I thought you were evil at first. Because of the things you did." The shadow was back, only more like a storm cloud now, borne of intense concentration. "Bad things."

"I..." The words died on his lips. How could she know?

"I know because you told me, Lian. Only I don't think you meant to. But it was there..." She pointed a small finger at his chest, right toward the space his physical heart occupied, but knew that wasn't exactly what she was referring to...

Dray knelt down next to her. "I think you have a very special gift, Nova. Has anyone ever told you that?"

The girl nodded slowly, but her attention was no longer directed at him. Her eyes widened, and he felt a twinge of fear run through her. A moment later he knew why as a subtle pulse vibrated through the Force.

Nova sensed them just before he did and she had no formal training. Amazing, he thought as he spun a graceful circle. Midway through the revolution, his lightsaber burst to life with a soothing hum. The golden blade shimmered like a mirage under the afternoon glare sending ripples of heat down his body.

Two beings emerged from the thick foliage, both dressed in midnight blue jumpsuits. They advanced with the sinuous gait of true predators. Their movements were mirrored in uncanny unison and Dray noticed an unmistakable resemblance. The intruders were brother and sister, probably twins. The only appreciable difference was hair length, his was shorn and shaven, while hers was a flowing ebony jungle.

Both radiated the icy heat of the dark side. Dray could smell it on them with the bittersweet piquancy of a finely aged roke wine. The male was the weaker of the two and neither one alone could overpower him. Working together, however... That was a different story, altogether.

At the moment, however, they were solely intent on Nova.

"They're evil," Nova said to Dray, her voice strong and assured.

The twins continued to eye the girl, almost hungrily. Dray was summarily ignored. Considering he was the self-appointed caretaker of the world they were currently trespassing upon Dray felt that was just plain rude.

"Excuse me," Dray said and casually switched off his lightsaber. He nearly smiled as he noted their confusion.

Their eyes danced over him and he could feel the soft murmurs of their minds touching his, prying for information. He allowed them to remain long enough to sense his formidable power and then banished them with but a thought.

The male, Xash was his name, spoke first. "You are Jedi."

"But not Jedi," his sister said. Sindra's head cocked slightly as if unsure of how to proceed.

Dray studied the adepts for a few moments, deciding on the best course of action. "You are observant," Dray finally said, "but not too smart." He waved his hand as if dismissing them from his presence. "Take what you will from the wreckage of the ship and then be gone from my home."

The twins exchanged a rapacious look - somewhere between a smile and a snarl - and then Sindra began to laugh. It was an ugly sound full of cruelty. "Our



master wishes otherwise. The girl will come with us." Her face became serious, the coldness of her visage hardening her beauty. "Stand aside or die."

"Big words from little adepts. You are both weak." Dray favored the twins with a hollow smile and a dangerous hiss. "I smell your fear."

Sindra started toward Dray but her brother apparently wanted the honor. "Leave him to me."

Without another word, the orange blade of Xash's lightsaber flashed into existence and he launched into a furious attack. The first strike, though powerful, was a bit slow.

Dray easily side-stepped and delivered a hard, open-handed slap to the back of his opponent's head.

Xash rolled with the impact and quickly returned to his feet. The male adept was enraged and obviously intent on revenge. He drew back his saber and started to advance.

Dray displayed the patient smile of a teacher whose student has just made a fool of himself. Dray winked at Xash then re-ignited the golden lightsaber, swinging the hilt around at a leisurely pace. The gilded blade finally extended with a soft thrumming of energy.

Outraged by Dray's show of disrespect, Xash lunged forward - leading in with a blinding flurry of strikes. Dray swiveled with practiced ease, dodging each attack and countering with his own.

The sabers clashed, sparks flying through the air. Xash pulled back and drove ahead with a quick slash toward Dray's throat.

Dray twirled his blade, catching Xash mid-strike and spinning Xash's saber through its own momentum. The move spun the weapon right out of the twin's grasp. Unfortunately for Xash, his right hand was still attached to the handle.

The severed appendage, clutching reflexively to the hilt, fell to the ground.

As Xash stared mutely at the stump of his arm, Dray planted a boot in Xash's chest. The blow toppled the surprised adept and he hit the ground stunned.

Dray readied his lightsaber, but before he could finish the job something caught his attention... The sound of Sindra igniting her own weapon.

In mid-turn, Dray felt the tip of her blade bite into his back. He ignored the wracking pain of his burned flesh and quickly followed through on his counter before Sindra could do any further damage.

The strong parry drove her back, giving Dray some breathing room.

She advanced slowly, the deep crimson blade held in a loose two-handed grip.

The two combatants began to circle.

Dray took a tentative swipe high to test her defenses. She countered easily. Sindra was quick, agile, and lithe. That wild mane of hair trailed behind her like a living thing.

Sindra moved the lightsaber high over head - the classic first-position of attack. The girl was well-trained indeed.

Dray adopted a lateral stance - the classic answer. He wasn't exactly an amateur either.

As expected, her blade arced through a downward strike. He parried with a sharply angled up-thrust. Sindra absorbed his defense and moved into a counter-parry that nearly disarmed him.

Gold and crimson flashed through the night.

They stepped back and circled again.

Dray took the lead in the deadly dance, delivering an overhead strike that abruptly became a feint and quickly cut low. Sindra inverted her saber and blocked the attack, allowing the impact to direct her blade toward Dray's neck. He parried, driving the tip of her blade downward; she was ready for it and their blades quickly locked together.

The two warriors paused long enough to offer one another an almost imperceptible nod, a grudging measure of respect.

Again they circled.

Sindra unexpectedly launched into a blinding series of slashes. Dray was hard pressed to block the flurry, but succeeded. Barely. Their last furious exchange left his chest aching for air, so he stepped back to momentarily catch his breath. It cost him.

Instead of taking the opportunity to do the same, Sindra came at him like a mad howler beast. Dray found himself forced into an ungainly riposte that became useless when her vertical downstrike abruptly transformed into a wicked slash that opened his right shoulder. He winced in pain and stumbled away.

Her eyes were glowing with hate, the fuel of the dark side. Dray could feel the power surging through her.

He felt a familiar, desperate craving surging in his belly. The soft whisper that had controlled his life the last few years began its soft serenade, but it had no effect. He was not yet angry and therefore his silky mistress could not help him...

Sindra exploded into another series of fluid strikes that sent him reeling back. He carefully measured her attack pattern and managed to catch her blade with the tip of his own. His unexpected parry forced her saber upwards. Right where he wanted it.

Dray attempted to sweep her left leg out from under her, a move that usually gave him the upper hand but Sindra's reaction time was better than he expected. She dropped a hand from her saber, using it to block his extended leg. An instant later she jabbed her other arm forward, using the haft of the weapon to smash Dray in the face.

The blow split his lip and knocked him to the ground. Instinct and years of training allowed him to retain his hold on the saber, which he waved back and forth to ward off any further strikes.

However, a follow-up attack was not forthcoming. She merely stood over her fallen opponent silently... Then she began to laugh.

Dray gingerly touched a hand to his throbbing lip, though he already knew it was bleeding from the sour taste in his mouth. He stared at the crimson stain spreading across his fingertips and his eyes narrowed to slits.

Her incessant cackling continued, sending a tidal wave of heat washing through his body. Dray's insides boiled as if his body temperature had suddenly risen to a feverish degree.

Dray heard the intimate whisper again. The silky voice grew louder, thundering in his ears and echoing through his brain as it infused his body with a burst of pure emotion.

Anger.

His heart raced as the raw fuel was quickly converted into energy. An ancient Corellian battle cry escaped his lips and Dray jumped to his feet, delivering a vicious two-handed swing powerful enough to split Sindra in two.

Recognizing the danger, Sindra quickly brought her saber up and deflected the vicious strike just in time. She staggered under the weight of the brutal offensive and was forced a few steps backward.

He shadowed her every move, rapidly closing the gap between them. Dray knew she had ceased her mocking laughter, but he could not get that terrible sound out of his head. All he wanted to do was kill her.

What was so wrong with that? he pondered, knuckles white from his death-grip on the lightsaber.

Nothing, came the whispery voice, growing louder and lovelier by the moment. Nothing at all.

Dray smiled, savoring the blood smeared across his lips. He craved more.

Sindra saw it in his eyes and it obviously frightened her. The tide of the battle had abruptly turned and she was on the wrong end. "I had you beaten," she said in a whining voice.

"Never dwell on the past." Dray grinned, an unpleasant sight. "If I were you, I'd be more concerned about your future. Or the lack thereof."

"No..." Sindra was retreating as fast as possible without turning her back on him.

"Lian!"

Nova's shrill call shook him out of the dark reverie. He was slightly disoriented, like someone startled out of deep slumber.

Dray glanced back in time to see Xash charging. The wounded limb, severed below the forearm, was tucked down at the twin's side. Xash snarled as his remaining hand swung a lightsaber in the direction of Dray's head.

With no time to turn, Dray lifted the blade up over his shoulder and then down again, successfully blocking Xash's strike. Unfortunately, it also left his front unprotected. A bad circumstance for Dray that Sindra immediately attempted to take full advantage of...

She had withdrawn herself from saber range, but had a variety of other nasty tricks at her disposal. One hand shot forward, serving as a focal point for her power.

Dray gasped for air as his heart began to constrict. He tumbled to his knees, the pain quickly becoming unbearable. Invisible claws tore mercilessly into his chest.

Sindra's face twisted into a vile facade and she hissed like a serpent. Her outstretched hand trembled as if she really held Dray's heart, gleefully digging in her nails to squeeze out every last drop of life.

Xash stepped back, obediently waiting to deliver the killing blow.

The lightsaber slipped from Dray's numb fingers and deactivated. He could not find his breath. His heart skipped, then faltered, and then stopped.

His anger grew stronger.

He inwardly called to the dark storm, begged for its providence. The kind mistress with the voice of whispery coils answered him. He could feel her silken breath tickle his ear.

Dray opened himself to the blinding rage, always seething like a second skin under his flesh. The hate swirled to a single-minded maelstrom of rage.

And the rage made him powerful.

His fingertips jerked outward and his fury erupted as crackling bolts of power. Force lightning streaked toward Sindra, enveloping her in a snare of electrical energy.

She cried out from depths of her being and sunk to the ground as spidery lances snapped voraciously around her.

Dray's heart jumped to life, the chilling sensation turned to fire, and he was free.

Xash had been watching in shock as his sister writhed in the dirt, so he was late in delivering the strike that a moment ago would have beheaded Dray.

It would be his final mistake.

Dray dropped flat on his back to dodge Xash's belated assault. As the high swing passed harmlessly above, Dray twisted his head around and gestured at his attacker.

Xash flew nearly a hundred feet before slamming into the trunk of a huge arcisia tree with a resounding crunch. The body slid to the ground and, if there was any doubt from the impact, Sindra's shriek told Dray all he needed to know. The uncanny link all twins seemed to share had been severed like a string. Xash was dead.

Renewed strength coursed through Dray, power given life by the anger that still burned within. He needed only flick his wrist and the golden saber flew to him, igniting with a joyous burst.

Four quick strides brought him to Sindra and he watched impassively as her body continued to convulse. Tiny electric charges crackled through her clouded eyes, across the cavern of her open mouth, and dancing down the rest of her body.

Dray raised the saber to finish it.

A voice, strong and sure, demanded to be heard. Tyrrahl... A Jedi does not kill an unarmed foe.

The velvet whisper answered and Dray echoed the words: "True."

He brought the blade down and Sindra's laughter finally stopped.

"But I am no longer a Jedi."

The breeze died away and then there was only silence.

Dray turned from the carnage and saw Nova's face - a mask of absolute horror. He had a resurgence of pain in his heart for a moment but it disappeared as quickly as it arrived.

The rage was also gone, scattered like dust in a hurricane. He was just Dray, breathing heavily and drenched in sweat. He was tired, hurt, and aching all over.

But there was something else, too. Something he had not felt in a long time.

Shame.

He opened his mouth to explain, to say something, but Nova was already sprinting away into the forest. He started to give chase, then realized he was too weak. Exhaustion had set in with frightening speed.

Drained physically and emotionally, Dray slipped down to his knees. He glanced warily at the bodies, at the bloodshed he had wrought. The twins shouldn't have come here, he rationalized, and the girl is not my responsibility.

That tingling whisper became his own voice. Of course not. Why bother going after her?

"Why?" he asked again, this time aloud.

He received no answer.

\* \* \*

Dray awoke from the nightmare screaming. A thin film of sweat covered his body and he shivered in the crisp night air.

The nightmare was all too familiar. His failure at Tyrrahl's test... The Citadel of Shadows.

No.

Dray refused to remember the incident. He needed to think of something else. He shut his eyes tightly.

And found himself staring into her face.

Cayli.

It was the day she learned of his betrayal. She did not believe it at first, refusing even after she saw Threem's corpse. It had to be a mistake, she said. Dray could never have fallen from the light. Not Dray. He was the strongest of all. Tyrrahl had predicted great things of every student he trained, but Dray... Dray was special.

It was not until she stood at the door of his quarters that she finally accepted the truth. For those trained in the Force, the stench of the dark side was one that could not be washed off or masked with fragrances. Dray practically exuded the sickly sweet scent from his pores.

Cayli was silent. The tears in her eyes cut deeper than any word ever could. It opened up a wound within Dray's soul, and there wasn't the tidy cauterization of an injury delivered by a lightsaber.

She was gone before... Before what? he wondered, before he could explain?

There was no explanation that would satisfy her. He had chosen his path of his own free will.

As with Nova, he had started to go after Cayli but those whispers folded around him like a blanket.



Even now it twisted his stomach into a sick knot. Waves of nausea took hold of him and would not let go until his stomach heaved itself barren.

The whispers came again as they always did when he relived that night. Usually that soft purring voice lulled him back to sleep, but now...

He did not go after Cayli.

That was a terrible mistake.

He lost the only love he had ever known, ever wanted. The only love that mattered.

For what? he demanded to know

The lady of whispers answered, wrapping him in her shadowy embrace... Your destiny.

Dray moaned and tossed in his sleep. He recalled one of the first days of his training.

\* \* \*

Ven-Mah Tyrrahl sat down on the tree stump, feeling every one of his seventy years. The old man sighed as he watched the lightsaber haft spinning end over end through the air. The Jedi Master raised a hand, using the Force to stop the weapon's progress.

"You must learn patience," Tyrrahl said.

Dray shook his head in disgust, squatting down to rub the tail of his sweat-soaked shirt across his forehead. "When you agreed to train me, you didn't say it would take an eternity to master the simplest of skills."

"These are the building blocks. Without a solid foundation, a house will crumble at the first storm."

"I ask for guidance and you give me children's sayings."

"You cannot become an expert overnight, Lian. Years of study and dedication are required before..."

"Why? I'm eager to learn. The others..." He glanced at the assembled group of students in the distance. "Why keep us all together if some can't keep up? Let me move at a quicker pace."

"The machine is only as strong as its weakest part."

"More platitudes!"

Tyrrahl shook his head and tried a different tact. "Tell me, when retreating from a battle would you abandon the lame of your group, the wounded? Leave them for dead?"

Dray's eyes grew cold. "I don't run from a fight."

"Answer the question!"

"Of course not."

"Everything you learn has applications that aren't always apparent immediately. You must learn to trust. There's too much you don't understand yet."

"Then teach me..."

"If it were only that simple."

"It is if you make it so."

Tyrrahl shook his head. The impetuosity of youth never failed to amaze him. There was so much this boy did not know but thought he did. "Beware," the Master warned, "the dark side offers a quick and easy path, but the destination is not what it seems. Your impatience in these matters could prove to be your undoing."

Even without his Jedi intuition, Tyrrahl could tell Dray's attention was focused elsewhere. Tyrrahl paused mid-sermon and allowed his gaze to wander, until Master and student were staring at the same thing.

It stood like a dark sentinel atop the jagged cliffs of Monfreen's northern peninsula, overlooking an ancient whirlpool of water whose great maw could swallow all but the largest starship. The keep had stood empty for as long as

Tyrrahl could remember and the local lore, usually colorfully descriptive of such an intriguing landmark, was surprisingly indeterminate. The aptly-named Citadel of Shadows held no grand tales of adventure.

Tyrrahl had visited the keep only once, stepping inside the monolithic gates with the fearful eyes of a young child instead of the resolve of a Jedi Master. The place was teeming with the dark side. Perhaps that strong concentration of the Force, albeit an evil one, was what drew him to Monfreen in the first place...

The Jedi Master willed away the memories. His concern at the moment was not his own experience with the Citadel.

Dray wore an expression that both terrified Tyrrahl and excited him. He had seen it before... On his own face, just before he entered the castle.

"Without the proper composure, you may easily find yourself in a dark place where you do not want to be, with no way out."

Dray finally gazed back at his Master. "The Citadel."

"You've felt its pull, have you?" Tyrrahl said, staring at something on the ground.

Dray's eyes were drawn once more to the towering spires in the distance. "There is a coldness there, such as I have never felt. The dark side dwells within."

Tyrrahl fought to keep his voice neutral. "You wish to go there?"

"I'm not sure..."

"Only those adepts prepared to move on to the next phase in their training dare set foot in that place. It is a dangerous test, possibly deadly if the Force is not your ally. Do you think you're ready for such a burden?"

"I'm not afraid of anything."

Tyrrahl lowered his head. He silently wondered how many times such an exchange had occurred between master and student. "Then don't let me stop you."

Dray tightened his grip on the lightsaber's silver haft and started walking.

"Trust in yourself and you cannot fail."

With one final glance over his shoulder, Dray nodded solemnly and went off to meet his destiny.

\* \* \*

Dray was still asleep, his pupils dancing to a furious beat behind his eyelids. His mind refused to recall the incident at the Citadel, even in a dream.

Other images began to take form, familiarly haunting yet at the same time something was different.

It was night and he was alone - in his life, in the world, in the galaxy.

Her face emerged from the shadows. Her lightsaber pulsed like a beacon in the darkness.

He knew he should deflect it but he couldn't lift his own saber. He had always been the better duelist, the best Tyrrahl had ever trained. He might have easily beaten her, disarmed her... Killed her.

But he could not move.

So he watched as she swung her glowing blade toward his neck.

Dray's mouth was open, but no sound emerged.

He merely stared at the face of his would-be killer. At first he thought it was Cayli, as it always was.

But this time it was different; it was not Cayli...

This girl was much older, but the features were unmistakable. It was Nova.

\* \* \*

Nova was in terrible danger.

Dray knew it as sure as he knew his own name. His head was a chaotic swirl of emotions he could not even begin to count. He had experienced too much in the last few hours to properly put into perspective.

And he had little time left to help her.

But did he want to?

Dray gathered a cleansing breath from the cool night air and began reciting the words ingrained in his head by Tyrrahl.

"Emotion, yet peace."

The voice of many whispers responded: A true warrior knows that peace is but a respite between battles. The sharpest blade is your own fury.

"Ignorance, yet knowledge"

They hide the real power from you. You must take it from them or be forever a slave to your Masters.

"Passion, yet serenity."

Only droids have no feelings. Are you no better than an automaton of the light side?

"Chaos, yet harmony"

Order must be imposed on the savages of the galaxy. Only then can true civilization thrive.

"Death, yet the Force"

Those who truly command the Force can escape even death. They make you think you are weak so they can control you.

Dray let out a guttural cry... Of anger, frustration, helplessness. He stared up accusingly at the coldly shimmering stars.

"I never asked for this!" he screamed at the impassive points of light. Momentarily overwhelmed, he bowed his head. Dray spoke softly, barely audible. "I didn't choose the way of the Force."

A gentle voice answered him. This time it was not that silky whisper. "No, Lian. The Force chose you. And now you must choose your own way."

He did not recognize it at first, though he soon realized it was not a single voice that spoke to him but rather an amalgam of many he already knew: Cayli, Master

Tyrrahl, Nova... And one other that spoke so forcefully he wasn't quite sure of its origin. Then he knew; it was his own.

\* \* \*

Nova shivered inside the small cage, afraid to touch to the shimmering bars of energy that held her prisoner. Her hands still hurt from the futile escape attempt a few moments ago.

She watched her captor going about his work, completely ignoring her. The man was thin, almost sickly, with a ragged cough. His frail form was cloaked in voluminous purple robes and elaborate jewelry. A ring adorned every finger, resulting in a insectile clicking whenever he wrung his hands together. He was bald with a heavily-scarred face and dead eyes. Every time he looked at Nova with those awful eyes, she unconsciously trembled.

The man was currently scowling at an obstinate portion of his ship's engine. The monolithic craft looked too heavy to be spaceworthy.

After a few moments of tinkering, sparks sizzled through the night sky. The man erupted into a string of colorful vulgarities as he withdrew his singed fingers from the compartment. Apparently, he was used to being obeyed.

The man whirled abruptly, eyes wild as they searched the forest.

"Did you think you could hide yourself from me?" he demanded to know.

In response, Dray stepped out of the brush and smiled. His fingers were calmly interlaced, the lightsaber swinging lazily at his side. "Had I wanted to approach you with stealth, my saber would have been at your throat as we speak." Dray glanced at Nova, held in the pulsing cage. He recognized the prison - a renowned Sith design that worked like a energy vortex. Anyone held within was cut off from the Force.

Dray shifted his focus back to the man. "You took something that was not yours. I suggest you give it back."

The man cackled in obvious amusement. "I am Thannor Keth, Sorcerer of the Sith. I answer to no one, and especially not to some Jedi whelp."

"You mean the same Jedi whelp who just deprived you of your adepts?"

Keth's smile faded. "So it would seem. A shame, really. Xash was mechanically inclined and my ship is in need of minor repairs." Keth held up a hand. "Perhaps if you fix the damage, I will overlook your transgressions and allow you to live."

Dray gestured at the ship's open engine systems with two fingers extended. "You mean that little part over there?" As he pointed, the systems erupted into a shower of blinding sparks.

Keth screeched in fury and started toward the burning compartment.

Seizing the moment, Dray ran to Nova, lighting his saber in mid-sprint. With one massive swing, he cleaved the energy bars in half and freed Nova. He jerked the girl to her feet and over his shoulder, slipping away the lightsaber so as not to give away their position.

As Keth battled the flames, Dray and Nova sprinted off into the night.

\* \* \*

Nova clung to Dray's neck, her eyes practically lit from within.

"Are you going to take me home now?"

Dray grunted as he ran, too winded at the moment to answer.

"I'll do my best."

"Okay," she said biting down on her lower lip. "But you have to promise not to do the bad thing anymore."

Dray stared at her for a second. "The dark side..."

Nova nodded emphatically.

"I'll do my best," he repeated.

"Promise?"

"Promise."

Satisfied, Nova tightened her hold. Dray glanced over his shoulder, hoping his distraction would buy them enough time to make it to his ship.

An arcing bolt of violet lightning lanced through the woods, slamming into Dray's back. He lost his hold on Nova and both went tumbling to the ground. Smoke drifted up from the wound and he lay there stunned.

"Fool!" More purplish energy crackled from Keth's hands, dancing between his fingers with the intricate beauty of a spider's web. "You don't know the power of the dark side!"

With a pronounced groan Dray slowly got back to his feet, eyes suddenly cold as he met Keth's gaze. "I am familiar with it..."

That caught the sorcerer for a moment. "Then you must know the futility of your actions." The electricity calmed for a moment as Keth stretched out a hand. "All you have to do is give me the girl and I will leave you in peace. Then it would be for you as it was before all this."

Dray glanced at Nova's bright face and smiled bitterly. "If only that were true," he said softly.

Keth sneered. "There is nothing so pathetic as a disgraced Jedi desperately clinging to that last fraying strand of his morality..." The Sith sorcerer made a grating, unpleasant sound that might have been a laugh. "This will be even easier than I anticipated."

Keth's eyes pulsed with crackling lightning that writhed down his torso, finally pooling at his fingertips. "You will now learn the error of your ways."

An echoing snap-hiss brought Dray's lightsaber to life. The gleaming gold blade pulsed with a molten energy as he held the graceful weapon in a two-handed grip before him. Dray nearly smiled as he said, "Maybe I already have."

Keth hissed and launched a phalanx of lightning from his hand.

Dray swung his saber up to meet Keth's electrical strands. As the arcing bolts began to shimmer down the blade, Dray swung the saber around and slashed at a nearby arcoscia tree. The large trunk was thicker than Dray was tall but the lightsaber, charged with the Force lightning, cleaved the thick bark in two. The excess energy discharged harmlessly into the air.



Dray grinned a challenge. "If that's the best you can do, I suggest you leave now before you embarrass yourself."

Keth answered with a guttural snarl. His right hand curled into a claw and something began to form within the palm. An iridescent sphere of energy swirled into existence, shining as if Keth had plucked a star from the sky above. Without a word, the Sith sorcerer hurled the shimmering bolt at Dray with uncanny accuracy.

Dray swung his saber to meet the orb, but to his shock the tip of his blade passed right through the globe of light. Dray was suddenly wracked with pain as the sphere made contact with his flesh. A thousand voices suddenly screamed with fury in his head, threatening to split it open.

Dray forgot where he was as pure unthinking hatred washed over him and he began to drown in a sea of anger that was not his own. He gasped for air, falling to his knees. He did not relinquish his grip on the lightsaber, but continued swinging it wildly as if to ward off some unseen foe.

Looking on in horror, Nova started to approach Dray, but the unpredictable play of his saber kept her at bay.

Keth watched with a bemused expression, his lip curling slightly. "It is over." The sorcerer chuckled softly as he began to gather his powers for the deathblow.

Dray lowered his saber, eyes wild, face covered in a sheen of sweat. He had never experienced such agony before, physical or mental. He had to do something though, and soon, for Keth was about to finish him off.

Dray heard the whispery voice that had been silent for so long. You've been a fool. The only way to defeat Keth is at his own game. Cry out to me again, Dray. Beg me for help and I will heed your call.

For what seemed like an eternity, Dray was torn in confusion.

Yes, Dray thought, it was the only way... Rage rippled below his skin like a physical entity.

Then his eyes, burning with anger, fell upon Nova. The girl stood watching him, her face betraying no emotion.

No. The fury melted away and for the first time in a long time, Dray felt as if he was truly at peace. He had made a promise. And he was going to keep it, even if it cost him his life.

Keth's eyes burned with victory as his formidable power took shape. Brilliant strands of dark side power formed to enmesh Dray. The lattice of energy began to sever the connection between him and the Force.

Dray could feel the strength slowly being sapped from his body. He had already accepted his fate. Ignoring the sharp spasms wrenching his body, Dray turned to Nova. With his last bit of energy Dray projected his thoughts into her mind, telling her to run before it was too late.

She did not move, though Dray knew he had successfully touched her thoughts. Dray didn't have time to ponder the situation. His vision was becoming blurred and shades of gray began to blot out everything else.

Dray felt like a droplet of water hanging from a rock over the ocean. He was about to begin that final descent into the endless sea, where his spirit would seep into something greater, For now though, he hung suspended...

The long-awaited fall never took place.

Instead he heard Nova's voice calling to him, echoing through him. A resurgence of power manifested itself and he saw her ghostly image extend a hand to him.

Dray reached out and when his hand touched hers, there was an explosion of harmonic brilliance... The celestial illumination of the light side.

His eyesight returned as a dazzling shield flared into existence to protect him from Keth's attack.

With a cry of agony, the sorcerer was blasted off his feet as if struck by a proton torpedo.

The shield vanished as quickly as it formed and Dray collapsed. He weakly turned his head to make sure Keth was no longer a threat... The only thing left of the Sith sorcerer was a scorched and tattered robe.

When he looked back, he saw Nova's face above his. Tears streamed down her face as she knelt over him.

Dray smiled at her and then closed his eyes for what he believed would be the final time.

The last thing he remembered was her hands, small and cool, pressing against his forehead and then he knew only darkness...

\* \* \*

Dray awoke in his bedroll, groggy and confused. The first thing he saw was Vigil's crimson sun, shining high above. His entire body ached but it felt good to be alive. The next thing he saw was Nova, sitting cross-legged nearby, watching over him silently.

Dray started to talk, but already felt her presence in his mind and there was nothing to say. So they exchanged a simple smile and he went back to sleep.

\* \* \*

Dray checked the start-up sequence for the third time, patting the side of his ship lovingly. He never thought he'd have need of the Lady of Light again. Dray hoped she wouldn't hold it against him.

He climbed into the pilot's chair, making sure Nova was secured beside him. He engaged the Lady's repulsorlift engines and stared out the viewscreen with a mixture of relief and trepidation as they ascended into the stars.

Dray allowed his gaze to linger over his adopted home and knew without question he would return to Vigil one day.

The emptiness of space around him all at once brought on an attack of nausea. Dray could still feel dark side poison flowing through him. He knew more than anything he wanted to return to the light, to be bathed in its warm and tender embrace.

It would not be an easy journey, but at least he was embarking on the first step.

Ossus. The center of Jedi learning; where Nova needed to be, to begin the long process of honing her amazing skills. It was also where Dray would have to confront those he had betrayed.

He had been lying to himself when he thought he could move on to any sort of future without first dealing with his past. As Master Tyrrahl always said, Lies are most beautiful when the truth wears an ugly facade.

It would be a perilous journey, even without old friends and loved ones trying to kill him. He was an exile, one of the Fallen, and he would be hunted every step of the way.

Dray wondered if Cayli was still on Ossus, wasn't quite sure if he wanted her to be there.

"She's very pretty."

The voice shocked him from his reverie. Dray looked at Nova questioningly for a moment, then realized...

"Yes, she is," Dray said with a faraway smile.

"Do you still love her?" Nova asked, though Dray was sure she already knew the answer.

His voice was soft and choked with old emotions given new reign. "Until the day I die."

"Maybe you should tell her that."

Dray shook his head, smiling at Nova's earnest response. His mind's eye recalled an image of Cayli and her unassuming beauty was enough to make his tarnished soul beam with joy and hope.

He glanced at Nova and nodded in thanks, for his new ward had helped him find something he thought was long-lost... Hope.

And at that moment, all was right with the galaxy.

**3999bby**

## **The Sith Lords Chronicles**

### **Part II: The Shadow of Freedom Nadd**

Time frame: 4,400 - 3,999 B.B.Y.

Period name: The Fall of the Sith Empire and Tales of the Jedi

An insidious force from within began to end centuries of peace and prosperity enjoyed by the Republic. An ambitious Jedi Knight, FREEDON NADD, followed rumor and intrigue to the isolated YAVIN SYSTEM. Six hundred years after the entombment of their former master, the Massassi Warriors turned to savage primates, but violent combat with Nadd changed to awe as he used the Force to show the Massassi their past, and unearthed their leader. Sadow taught Nadd dark twistings of the Force, offering him Sith weapons and abilities no other Jedi Knight could withstand. Freedom Nadd leaves Yavin 4 soon afterwards, intent on becoming the king of ONDERON, a primitive world outside of the Old Republic's boundaries. The fate of Sadow remained a mystery.

The inhabitants of Iziz, a walled city on Onderon under constant attack by beasts from the jungles surrounding the settlement, were awed by Nadd's display of sorcery, and swayed by his mastery of the Dark Side. In the decades that followed, Nadd helped his subjects develop destructive technology to nullify the monsters from the outside, and any rebels from within. Nadd's policies included banishment for criminals, some of whom survived in the jungles and banded together, even training the monstrous beasts and beginning a centuries-long guerilla war. After his death, Nadd's sarcophagus became the focus of dark-side energy, and enabled Nadd's descendants continue to battle their own people in a civil war. When the Republic expanded its territories and encountered Onderon, it gave Jedi Master ARCA JETH the stewardship of the Onderon system, who in turn, sent his three students - the good-natured but hotheaded brothers ULIC and CAY QEL-DROMA, and the Twi'lek TOTT DONEETA - to end this seemingly simple dispute.

Meeting with the ancient ruler of Iziz, Queen Amanoa, who explained her people's predicament, the Jedi fought in the next attack by the beast riders, who

abducted Amanoa's daughter Galia. The three Jedi found Galia with the warlord leader ORON KIRA, who plan to marry and unify those inside and outside the city. The Jedi mediate a meeting with Amanoa and her daughter, who has no interest in such a treaty, and instead continues to secretly thrive on Freedon Nadd's dark side power; summoning an army to crush the beast riders. The Jedi fight back, calling on their Master Arca, whose arrival turns the tide and forces the evil shadows out of the city. The beast warriors and the citizens can begin their tentative first steps towards reconciliation.

### **Part III: The Naddist Revolt**

Time frame: 3,998 B.B.Y.

Period name: The Freedon Nadd Uprising

The Sect of Freedon Nadd was more powerful than even the Jedi could have imagined. After the end of the Beast Wars, Jedi Master ARCA JETH, and his Padawans ULIC and CAY QEL-DROMA, and the Twi'lek TOTT DONEETA, attempt to eliminate the source of Sith energy; Nadd's sarcophagus and the coffin of the evil QUEEN AMANOA, to the nearby moon Dxun. During the removal however, followers of Nadd launch a spectacular and surprise attack from below the city, striking Master Arca with Dark Force and capturing the remains of Nadd. Upon recovery, Arca discovers that Queen Amanoa's husband, KING OMMIN, is still alive, and his husk-like being is hidden in a secret life-support facility. Visiting the King with the new Queen Galia, and Ulic Qel-Droma, Arca discovers the King himself is the real source of the dark side shadow in Iziz. Once a follower of Nadd, Ommin's tribulations had released Nadd's spirit, which had joined with the King.

The vile King Ommin arcs bolts of Sith energy out at Arca, knocking him to his knees. Ulic Qel-Droma's brave battle was in vain, and his Master is taken by the King to a dark-side stronghold where Nadd's sarcophagus had been placed. Overwhelmed by his failure, Ulic calls on the Galactic Republic for assistance, and a coalition of military ships and Jedi from the library world of Ossus (which included NOMI SUNRIDER) begins a fierce battle, attempting to reach Ulic's location. Meanwhile, on one of the Republic's space-cruisers, aristocrats SATAL KETO and his cousin ALEEMA arrive. Heirs to the now-corrupt Empress Teta system and calling themselves THE KRATH, they have limited but dangerous

knowledge of Sith magic, and had appropriated artifacts recovered by scholar Jedi Odan-Urr after the Great Hyperspace War, including an ancient book of the Sith. They hope to meet someone to translate and teach them more about the Sith. Their novice dark side abilities allow them to reach King Ommin's stronghold.

Satal and Aleema meet the King, who is delighted with the book, and a scribe begins to translate it until the specter of Freedon Nadd appears. Nadd realizes the Republic forces pounding his compound would soon overwhelm the King, and so he approaches the two aristocrats, telling them he would guide them to a new Sith Golden Age. As the Jedi Knights fight to Ommin's stronghold, Nadd breaks his hold on the King, allowing Ulic to vanquish the monarch and rescue his master. Nadd's presence flees back to the Empress Teta system with Satal and Aleema, but a vision still haunts the Jedi; claiming that others would succumb to the dark side. After the final defeat of the King's forces, the Jedi impose martial law on Onderon, and the sarcophagus of Nadd is finally sealed behind slabs of Mandalorian iron on the beast moon of Dxun.

*I am Komok-Da, direct descendant of the original Sith, and Master of weapons and armor. I will tell you of Sith weapons, but only if you vow to use them, for nothing displeases me more than to know that a weapon gathers dust.*

*The earliest Sith weapon was the Sith sword. When the exiled Jedi first arrived in Sith space, it was with these blades that my ancestors greeted them. The Sith sword is an alchemically altered blade attached to an ordinary sword hilt. The alterations enable the blade to deflect blaster bolts, just as lightsabers do. The blade also focuses the Force energy of the user, giving the edge an unnatural sharpness. As the wielder grows more proficient in the power of the dark side, the blade becomes more deadly.*

*Sith swords are effective against lightsabers not only because of the way their alchemically altered metal refracts the lightsaber's energy, but also because they retain their rigidity and sharpness against such energy weapons. And unlike ancient lightsabers, Sith swords do not require power packs or energy cells. Despite the fact that a Sith sword was often a match for a lightsaber when wielded by a trained Sith warrior, they are seldom used by contemporary Sith. Although lightsabers are a superior weapon, there is still nothing quite as satisfying as feeling the warm spray of blood when one cleaves through one's enemy with a metal sword.*

*There are no records that tell whether the earliest Sith Lords had any knowledge of lightsaber technology, which the Jedi were still refining when they banished the Dark Jedi to the Unknown Regions. The earliest existing record of a Sith who used a lightsaber was the self-proclaimed Dark Lord of the Sith, Freedon Nadd, a former Jedi apprentice who learned the ways of the Sith from the spirit of Naga Sadow. Despite Nadd's complete lack of Sith lineage, it is a testament to his powers that he conquered Onderon and transformed it into a prosperous world.*

*More than three hundred years after Nadd's death, his spirit trained another renegade Jedi, Exar Kun, who modified his own lightsaber into a double-bladed weapon. Since adopted by other Sith warriors, the double-bladed lightsaber can be ignited from either end or both ends simultaneously. On some models, the handle can be disconnected at the middle to become two separate weapons. The design of the double-bladed lightsaber maximizes the weapon's potential and provides an added surprise in duels with Jedi.*

*Armor and talismans can be alchemically treated during construction to tip the scales of battle. Dark armor is almost always created to meet the specific needs of the wearer, and generally provides additional protection against blasters and lightsabers, or extra resistance against certain forms of attack. Sith talismans are less restrictive physically, and can provide the wearer with an extra defense against blaster bolts, lightsaber blades, and even the Force itself. I will advise anyone that it is best to craft one's own personal armor and talismans without assistants, as assistants cannot always be trusted to serve one's best interests.*

*The Sith lanvarok is a short-range weapon worn on the forearm and designed to hurl thin, solid disks in an unpredictable spray pattern. My ancient ancestors developed the lanvarok as a hunting weapon, and those who are strong with the Force will have little difficulty guiding the disks to their targets. The lanvarok is specifically designed for either the right or left forearm, and few are interchangeable from right to left. Although the lanvarok is time-consuming to reload, it is well worth the wait when one sees the fear and surprise in the eyes of one's enemies as they receive a sudden hail of whirling projectiles.*



*Although edged and projectile weapons are designed to kill on contact, some targets are most resilient, and one should never dismiss the use of Sith poison. Created by means of Sith alchemy, this toxin is more accurately described as a disease; once in the system of a Force-using being, it remains there, gradually weakening the enemy's resistance to the dark side of the Force. Sith poison can be introduced into a victim's system by ingestion, but I admit a preference for using a long-range dart for injection. The poison feeds victims' anger,*

*drawing them closer to the dark side. A strong dose can overcome those who have already embraced the dark side, and even the most powerful Sith are usually unable to heal themselves after the poison sets in.*

*I am more than willing to provide detailed instructions on building any Sith weapon or concocting Sith poison. However, you must first demonstrate your ability to kill without mercy. Return to me with proof of your kill and you shall be rewarded. But be warned: I will not be impressed if you return with small prey.*

#### **Part IV: Attack of the Krath**

Time frame: 3,997 B.B.Y.

Period name: The Coming Ruin

It is the beginning of a time of toil and torment for the Republic. Sith apprentices SATAL KETO and ALEEMA return and begin a coup in the Empress Teta system, crushing any resistance with their newly-acquired Sith powers and followers, known as THE KRATH. News of the revolt reaches ONDERON, where ULIC and CAY QEL-DROMA, TOTT DONEETA, and NOMI SUNDRIDER are restoring peace after the Freedon Nadd uprising. Master ARCA sends Nomi and Ulic, and the Republic military also responds with forces to the seven worlds all being savaged by the Krath. During the space battle, the bridge of Ulic's flagship is destroyed by a Krath suicide craft, and Ulic himself is severely wounded, saved by Nomi, and the Republic forces are routed.

Concurrently on distant Dantooine, Jedi Master VODO-SIOSK BAAS trains three students, including the talented EXAR KUN whom Vodo sees a disturbing shadow around. After an altercation with the other students, Kun brutally defeats Vodo in lightsaber combat, and leaves for Onderon, anxious to learn more about the Great Hyperspace War and the Sith. Posing as a Jedi archaeologist, Kun receives

assistance from Cay Qel-Droma and Tott Doneeta, but Kun's arrogance wins no favors with Master Arca, who refuses to help. Leaving Onderon, Kun journeys to the beast moon of DXUN, where his mercenary forces infiltrate the tomb of Freedon Nadd, and Kun is shocked to witness a specter. The ghost reveals precious scrolls, and these lead him to KORRIBAN, the tomb world of the Sith Empire. Exploring an impressive series of catacombs, he is caught in a ceiling collapse, and crushed. Shouting for help, Nadd's specter appears again, promising help if he turns to the Dark Side. Letting out a tremendous psychic shriek, Kun startles Master Vodo, who is on his way to DENEBA , and the assembly of ten thousand Jedi.

This historic meeting, called by the great librarian ODAN-URR to seek a method of repelling the Krath menace, descends into chaos when hordes of Krath war droids attack the assembly. Fighting valiantly, the Jedi defeat this menace, despite the tragic death of Jedi Master Arca, who himself was saving the life of Ulic Qel-Droma. Ulic's self-doubt intensifies. Brashly, he decides to infiltrate the Krath. Meanwhile, back on Korriban, Exar Kun is told to journey to Yavin 4, where he is caught by the savage Massassi and forced to call upon the dark side to save him from being sacrificed. Nadd's specter appears one final time to claim Kun as his own, but Kun embraces the power of the dark side for himself, and eradicates Nadd for ever. Exar Kun proclaims himself the new Dark Lord of the Sith, enslaves the Massassi into building structures focused in dark force energy, and locates the buried battleship of Naga Sadow. Exar Kun's power is in the ascendance.

## **Part V: Corruption of the Jedi**

Time frame: 3,996 B.B.Y.

Period name: The Sith War (beginning)

Jedi ULIC QEL-DROMA and EXAR KUN's tribulations and descent into darkness continue. Ulic infiltrates the Krath city of CINNAGAR, killing an innocent attempting to assassinate ALEEMA, one of the Krath's founders. Aleema takes Ulic to meet her cousin KETO at the palace, who ignores Ulic's stories; instead he tortures and poisons him, believing he is a Jedi spy. Throwing off these attacks, Ulic is eventually trusted, and placed as the general of the Krath military, and as Aleema's personal pet. Ulic's Jedi colleagues, meanwhile, launch a rescue

mission, and NOMI SUNRIDER infiltrates the planet, but is captured and brought before Keto, who slyly asks Ulic what should be done with her. Despite once being lovers, Ulic orders Nomi's execution.

Nomi despairs of Ulic, and uses her Force meditation to escape the dungeons of Cinnagar, even as Ulic scribes a message for her, informing her of his plans. Alas, Nomi returns to her ship unaware of this, believing Ulic to have fallen to the dark side. The message lands in the hands of Keto, who believes himself vindicated, and orders Ulic's swift death. Ulic unleashes a force of unruly fury at the death of Master Arca, avenging the death by defeating Keto, and taking the Krath throne by the side of Aleema. Meanwhile on Yavin 4, a more powerful EXAR KUN rests in his meditation chamber, reaching out across the galaxy and detecting other Sith practitioners with his psychic tendrils. Believing himself to be the instigator of a new Sith Golden Age, Kun journeys to the Empress Teta system to destroy Ulic, knowing him to be a threat to his power.

Despite grave concerns from their Jedi Masters, Jedi Knights TOTT DONEETA, CAY QEL-DROMA, and NOMI SUNRIDER attempt to remove Ulic from the Krath once more. Ulic responds with all the military might he can muster, but Nomi still fights through to Ulic's inner chamber, where the deluded Jedi casts her away. The dejected Jedi forces withdraw. After the Jedi retreat, Exar Kun arrives, and a dazzling clash of Jedi blades and sorcery begins. An amulet on each Sith, bearing the visage of long-dead Dark Lord of the Sith MARKA RAGNOS, begins to pulsate as the battle continues, and to their surprise, Ragnos appears to command the two men to join together. Ragnos' claims of a new period of Sith glory succeeds in a truce, as Kun and Ulic vow to create such a destiny. The Sith War begins.

## **Part VI: The War of the Sith**

Time frame: 3,996 B.B.Y.

Period name: The Sith War

Two dark powers have joined forces and begin to corrupt and sway weak minds across the galaxy. Sith Lords EXAR KUN and ULIC QEL-DROMA consolidate their forces, and Kun begins to convert weak-willed Jedi students on the planet Ossus, speaking as a prophet. Knowing ancient Jedi librarian ODAN-URR kept an original Sith holocron used by Naga Sadow, Kun slays Odan-Urr and steals the artifact.

When the young Padawans discover the slaying, Kun informs them that the sacrifice was necessary to grant him even more knowledge. Returning with his converts to the Massassi temples on YAVIN 4, he binds the Jedi with powerful Sith magic, and appoints Jedi apprentice CRADO his second-in-command.

Meanwhile, Ulic Qel-Droma's role was more strategic, utilizing the Krath military on an all-out assault on Coruscant in the hope of usurping the power of government. Loyal Jedi, including NOMI SUNRIDER, CAY QEL-DROMA, TOTT DONEETA, and Masters VODO-SIOSK BAAS and THON join forces to drive back this threat. The force of light surrounded Ulic, who was caught and his forces repelled. Ulic was quickly brought to trial, and his betrayal of the Republic shocked those of the Great Senate. Nomi and Cay requested leniency, but Ulic asked for no such clemency. Master Vodo sensed another presence; that of his lost student Exar Kun. Moments later, Kun entered the chambers, and manipulated the president of the Senate into a hypnotic stupor. Master Vodo stepped onto the Senate floor, and challenged his wayward apprentice. The battle progressed and Vodo gradually weakened, vowed to defeat Kun, but was immediately slain. Kun and Ulic walked out of the Senate, and returned to Yavin 4.

Many more Jedi died as the battle between the Jedi and the Sith continued, as Kur's new Sith-possessed cohorts descended on their masters across the worlds. Crado attempted to dispatch Jedi Master Thon, but failed, and returned to Yavin 4 pleading for another chance to show his worthiness. Kun obliged, and Crado successfully located and returned with a powerful Sith weapon from Naga Sadow's flagship. This was used to create a gigantic star storm that obliterated the entire CRON cluster system. However, Crado's fate was sealed, along with Ulic's Krath partner ALEEMA; when the weapon was activated, they were caught in the devastating conflagration and vanished. The shockwave burst apart across the galaxy, reaching the world of Ossus and rupturing it, destroying the Jedi library and thousands of teachings and artifacts. The Jedi were in disarray.

## **Part VII: The Seal of Yavin 4**

Time frame: 3,996 B.B.Y.

Period name: The Sith War (ending)

The library world of Ossus suffered continuous bombardment from the Sith. Sensing an incoming catastrophe, many Jedi struggled to safeguard or hide the thousands of artifacts. Jedi Master OOD BNAR, a treelike entity, had taken the role of librarian after the killing of ODAN-URR, and upon learning of the incoming shockwave, sought to protect the most valuable antiquities. Just as he was burying a collection of ancient lightsabers, Sith Lord EXAR KUN and his MASSASSI WARRIORS breached his chamber and attempted to defeat him. As Ood fought valiantly, he called upon the very soil of Ossus to protect him, and was transformed into a colossal tree protecting the weapons. Kun and his troops were forced to flee with other treasure, and Ood survived.

As the supernova shockwaves ripped across the galaxy, the Republic and Jedi forces rallied against Dark Lord of the Sith ULIC QEL-DROMA. Jedi NOMI SUNRIDER, CAY QEL-DROMA, and TOTT DONEETA attempted to engage Ulic in battle. Clashing in an aerial dogfight, Ulic crippled Cay's starfighter, and forced it to land. In an anger-filled rampage, Ulic lashed out at Cay, who defended himself without wishing to harm his brother. The assault continued, and Ulic struck down Cay. This act of fratricide filled Ulic with horror. Too late to save their friend, Nomi used the Force to blind Ulic to the Force. Now a shell of his former self, Ulic collapsed. He attempted an act of salvation, offering to lead Jedi Master THON in a consolidated attack against Exar Kun on Yavin 4.

Exar Kun sensed the incoming attack, and the "degeneration" of his ally, Ulic. A powerful, but single entity, Kun could not hope to withstand the coordinated strike, so he hatched a plan with his remaining Massassi, chaining himself to the focal points of the great pyramids he had constructed to collect dark energy. Sapping the Massassi' life-force as the Jedi assailed his stronghold, his final act of Sith sorcery infused his spirit within the temple. His psychic tomb would lie quiet for four thousand years, until its discovery by Padawans at LUKE SKYWALKER'S Jedi Academy. As Kun's ritual ended, the jungles of Yavin 4 were scorched, and the Jedi Knights departed to stabilize the Republic. The Sith War was at an end.

3,996 bby

## Master Tolaris Shim recording

*I have been asked to provide an explanation for how Ulic Qel-Droma, who sought to destroy the Krath and the Sith, became a Sith Lord and a committer of fratricide. While certain influences and circumstances may have seemed specific to Qel-Droma's transition from Jedi to Sith Lord, an objective analysis suggests that his transition to the dark side was not so unique.*

*Whether by accident, inclination, or misdirection from others, even the most disciplined Force-user eventually steps onto the path that leads to the dark side. This gateway to corruption is paved with good intentions, more frequently traveled as a means to efficiently achieve a desired result than to accomplish deliberate evil.*

*Because Force-users who crave power, embrace hatred, seek revenge, and suffer tragedy are especially susceptible to being lured toward the dark side, some members of our Order have proposed that Force-sensitive beings should somehow be identified and conscripted at infancy, so that they might begin Jedi training without exposure to negative influences. Although such training might produce stronger and more reliable Jedi, the notion of recruiting babies to our cause is obviously controversial. Opponents to the proposal are quick to note that the historic record lists numerous Jedi who raised their own children in the Jedi ways with mixed results. Because even these Jedi-trained offspring were not entirely immune to the lure of the dark side, it seems that even a lifetime of training is no guarantee to prevent casualties.*

*The dark path is experienced in four stages: temptation, imperilment, submission, and atonement or redemption. To those who believe they are immune to any of these stages, just as Ulic Qel-Droma may have believed himself immune, I say you are already victim to the dark side's seductive tendrils, and urge you to listen as you have never listened before.*

*First stage: temptation. Because you are a Jedi and possess Force powers, you will find yourself in situations in which you may be tempted to use or demonstrate your abilities, to rush to the aid of an ally, confront apparent dangers, or resolve differences hastily. But if you are prone to action before patience, to draw blood first and ask questions later, you will step onto the dark path.*

*Second stage: imperilment. A Jedi must know when to act and when to wait. A Jedi cannot be indecisive, nor can a Jedi take a detour onto the dark path and expect to find a guidepost that will return him to the light. If you obsess about doing the right thing no matter what the cost may be, and believe you can maintain at least some semblance of the light when you finally make your decision, you are imperiled to remain upon or revisit the dark path. If you accept the dark side of the Force as a means to power, you are most likely not concerned about taking the next step.*

*Third stage: submission. Once you accept the dark path, you may no longer believe there is any need to justify your actions. If you are at all aware of how far you have strayed from the ways of the Jedi, you may be merely tainted by the dark side but might still find a way to return to the light. If you find it liberating and exhilarating to give yourself fully to the dark side, then you are a Dark Jedi, and it is the responsibility of your former allies to either stop you or attempt to bring you back to the light.*

*Fourth stage: atonement or redemption. Through a period of meditation, reflection, and absolution, a Jedi who is tainted by the dark side can atone for her actions. A Dark Jedi cannot atone, but may find redemption by turning away from the dark side and performing a selfless act of heroism without calling upon the dark side of the Force. A Dark Jedi who has no desire to relinquish the power of the dark side and return to the light cannot be redeemed.*

*The possibility of atonement or redemption has led various Jedi to believe that they could control their journey on the dark path in order to conquer evil. None has ever succeeded.*

*Do I encourage that you avert your gaze from the shadows? No, I do not! Nor do I suggest that you blind yourself by the light. I merely say that one cannot avoid the darkness unless one knows where it lies and the routes that lead to it, and that a Jedi is ultimately responsible for his powers. Trust that even the most learned Jedi Master must always be mindful of the dark path.*

*May the Force be with you.*

**3,986bby**

## **Part VIII: The Redemption of Ulic Qel-Droma**

The dishonored instigator of the Sith War, ULIC QEL-DROMA, flitted through worlds like a gray shadow, filled with guilt and the ghosts of those he had corrupted. After ten years, Ulic reached the frozen tundra of RHEN VAR, and sought refuge in an abandoned fortress. Meanwhile, NOMI SUNRIDER, who once had affection for Ulic, mourned the man she had once loved while expending her energies in the rejuvenation of the order of the Jedi Knights. However, this came at the expense of nurturing her impressionable daughter, VIMA; the child of Nomi and the felled Andur Sunrider. Vima's lack of training caused her to rebel and flee the great Jedi convocation Nomi had arranged at Exis Station. Vima wished to see Ulic, and become his Padawan.

Despite severe reservations, Ulic agreed to teach her in the ways of the Force, though blind to it himself, and Vima began to soften, learning the Jedi credo of honor and duty. Meanwhile, a Cathar Jedi named SYLVAR, sought revenge on Ulic for the death of her mate, CRADO, who had died releasing the Sith STAR STORM. Tracking Vima with the help of a scavenger HOGGON, Sylvar reached Vima's location at the same time as Nomi, who had also engaged in a frantic search. Sylvar's aggressive attack against Ulic was fended off by Vima, and both Sylvar and Nomi had to prevail over their anger at Ulic, who had been cursed with the loss of his connection to the Force. Mercenary Hoggon, however, was less enamored with this forgiveness, and sensing a historic moment, shot Ulic in the back, killing him and making his own footnote in galactic history.

To the shock of those present, Ulic's corporeal being fell, but his spirit was swept up into a bright light. His ethereal form showed that despite his dark path and being blinded to the Force, he had finally progressed to a spiritual and mental apex; he had become a true Jedi Master. Nomi and Vima returned to the Jedi Knights with a new sense of commitment to the Force. While the Jedi order attempted to intercede in regional conflicts, such as the KANZ DISORDERS, the Republic remained in an uneasy period of peace until a vicious warrior race appeared to threaten the stability of the Republic twenty years later.



My mother, the Jedi Nomi Sunrider, kept two holograms for as long as I could remember. One hologram was of my father Andur, who was killed when I was just a baby. The other was of Ulic Qel-Droma. I was still a child when my mother and I watched Ulic's ship leave Ossus, and I knew even then that he had been my mother's second great love. Because I remembered him so well as he was, it was difficult for me to associate him with the man he became, described by other Jedi as a tragic and despicable figure.

The story is known by most Jedi. Ulic Qel-Droma, the great Jedi who attempted to destroy a Sith sect from within but succumbed to the dark side instead. After joining forces with Exar Kun, a renegade Jedi who had embraced the dark side for purely selfish reasons, Ulic became a Dark Lord of the Sith, and killed his own brother during the interstellar conflict known as the Sith War. The Sith War concluded when my mother stripped Ulic of his Force powers, and Exar Kun was destroyed on Yavin 4. Many Jedi would prefer that the story ended there, so that it might continue to serve as a perfect cautionary tale for those who consider walking the dark path. However, Ulic's story did continue.

A decade after the Sith War, during the Jedi Convocation at Exis Station, I was a rebellious teenager and eager to learn the ways of the Jedi. Although my mother had insisted that I apprentice to her, she was often preoccupied by her duties as a leader in the Republic and a spokesperson for the Jedi Knights. I admit I felt neglected, but I was also determined to become a Jedi. I cannot explain my reasoning, but when I overheard the Jedi Sylvar remark that Ulic Qel-Droma had gone from being the greatest Jedi Knight of his era to—in Sylvar's opinion—a war criminal who wandered free and unpunished, I realized that I wanted to be trained by Ulic.

I was not so desperate to gain knowledge that I would seek it from the man who had killed so many—including Sylvar's mate, the Jedi Crado—during the Sith War. Nor was I trying to spurn my mother or attract her attention. I maintain it was something in the Force that compelled me to locate Ulic. Although I knew he was no longer the man

I remembered from my childhood, I sensed that I would find there was still goodness in him, and that he would be a great teacher.

A spacer named Hoggon delivered me to the frozen, desolate world Rhen Var, where I found Ulic in an abandoned city. The lost look in his gaze would have been an obvious sign to anyone that he was a shattered being, ravaged by guilt and regret. I imagined his only reason for being on Rhen Var was that he found it a suitable place to die. After I identified myself and explained why I'd sought him out, he told me to go home. Soon afterward, I became lost in a blizzard, but Ulic saved me. As much as he believed he had nothing to offer me, I was convinced that he had to be my teacher. With great reluctance, he finally accepted.

And despite his inability to feel the Force, he taught me how to understand it. Although he was no longer capable of building a lightsaber, he instructed me to construct my own. From him, I learned that there isn't a rule book or a simple test to take to become a Jedi Master; one can only achieve this by facing ordeals, making life-and-death choices, and then facing more ordeals. I believe my time with Ulic gave him a sense of purpose he had not felt since he was a Jedi. By the time my anxious mother tracked us to Rhen Var, I was a Jedi.

Unfortunately, Hoggon had identified Ulic, and he alerted the vengeful Sylvar; together they arrived shortly after my mother. Sylvar attacked Ulic, but he refused to fight her, and his example convinced her that she had, over the years, become a pawn of her own emotions. Although Ulic freed Sylvar of her anger, he was unable to anticipate or dodge the blaster fired by the glory-seeking Hoggon.

My mother held Ulic as he died, and to our astonishment his body vanished, leaving my mother clutching at his empty, ragged clothes. Ulic may no longer have been able to touch the Force, but he understood it more than any of us.

He had the heart of a Jedi.



3964 bby

## The Secret Journal of Doctor Demagol

By John Jackson Miller  
*Hyperspace (2010)*

*[This story is set in 3964 and 3963 B.B.Y., beginning weeks before the surprise attack by the Mandalorians on the Republic. It encompasses the events of Volumes 1 through 9 of Dark Horse's **Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic** series; a serious Spoiler Warning is thus in order!]*

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**Audio system activated. Playback beginning.**

**Entry #6005: I am recognized.** Today was agreeable. Mand'alor called a gathering of his other advisers and spoke about my contributions to the clans. He announced he had awarded me the Flashpoint Stellar Research Station, recently captured, as a forward base for my studies.

The facility should suit my needs, but that hardly matters. No, the important thing is that, two decades after my greatest setback, I still retain the confidence of our leader. And why not? *There is only one Demagol.* And I, in my time, will achieve more for the Mando'ade than any who ever took up armor.

Certainly more than Cassus Fett, who stood by Mand'alor the whole time. I have never been able to read expressions -- so-called "body language" -- the way that other Zeltrons say they can. It is one reason I like being among the Mandalorians: helmeted faces do not speak. But I suspect even I would have found Fett's true face revealing today. Oh, he spoke again and again, nattering into Mand'alor's ear. Flashpoint would be another New Generation Project, he said -- another waste of time. "Better to defeat the Jedi by force of arms," he said, rather than using our wits to pry their secrets from them.

Thankfully, Mand'alor has never changed on this score. Jedi power humiliated Mandalore the Indomitable during the Sith War. If that power can be understood, can be negated -- can even be harvested for the clans, my microscope will prove mightier than a thousand Dreadnaughts.

Fett sees the Mandalorians as a blunt weapon. I will craft them into a scalpel.

**Entry #6019: Flashpoint attained.** Others say they find Flashpoint a wretched place, but I find it suits me. A world in a death-embrace with its sun, tumbling so quickly that night and day rocket by. Only the magnetic shields permit safe habitation of the surface. It was people of science who first settled here -- and now, under my command, this station will do research again. Only the power of the Jedi dwarfs any secrets the Republic scientists might have found. It is the *true* power of the stars.

When I arrived, I was prodded to speak a few words to the warriors serving here as sentries. I really had nothing to say. They knew of me, of course; all Mandalorians know of *demar'agol*, the "flesh-carver." But they had little idea why I was brought here -- as if they could understand my work anyway!

I know I will never understand them. I had a low birth, among low people. I have been a slave. But by advancing my knowledge, I advanced myself, wherever I was. First, as a slave -- and, after I was freed, as a Mandalorian recruit. Even as a medical student in the Republic, after the war. When I found a frontier, I charged it. Stagnation is death.

Perhaps I should have told them that.

Ah, well. Someone must guard the outpost.

**Entry #6025: The first arrivals.** Mand'alor has kept his word. A transport has arrived bearing Jedi prisoners. The war has not even begun in earnest, and yet I have my first subjects. I will continue as before, categorizing differences in Jedi versus base members of their species.

These are meager pickings to begin with. A Rodian and another human. Why must they always be humans? How I long to find a Trandosha Jedi, to compare my past control groups. Vivisection experiments become so much easier when limbs can be regrown. Who says there are no second chances?

I was less pleased to see who brought them here: Pulsipher. According to his message, Mand'alor sent Pulsipher here to be my "aide" -- but I can hardly imagine anyone less suitable. We agree on only one thing: "The Force" is pseudo-scientific claptrap -- a tale spun by the Jedi to keep the people in awe. A secret well of power, from which only the selected few may draw? How offensive.

But Pulsipher rejects my conclusions that "Force powers" are inborn genetic traits -- natural mutations, that any being can be modified to have. What does *he* think gives Jedi their powers? Why, *magic*, of course! Mystic talismans and trinkets, that's what he believes!

I realize that Mand'alor is trying to cover all his options -- but really. Perhaps he could send me a Wookiee witch doctor on the next transport.

**(Knights Of The Old Republic #0)**

*The Taris Holofeed: Prime Edition*

## STALEMATE ON SUURJA CONTINUES

### FOURTH BATTLE IN SIX WEEKS INCONCLUSIVE

TARNITH STATION—Mandalorian and Republic forces have retired from the Outer Rim system of Suurja with neither gaining an advantage, according to embedded journalists with the Republic Fleet.

An agrarian world with a colonist population of 16 million, Suurja is the latest battlezone on the line of Jebble-Vanquo-Tarnith. It has been just over a year since the Mandalorians conquered their last populated system in the Outer Rim, not counting the Flashpoint stellar research station taken four months ago.

"This shows that the cordon that Captain [Saul] Karath has thrown up is holding," said Republic defense official Catronus Steffans. "It's only a matter of time before we begin pushing in the other direction."

Steffans chose not to respond to the recent controversy in the Jedi order over participation in the war. "Our relationship with the order is the most important the Republic has. We value their cooperation in any and all endeavors with us they choose to join."

Despite the official optimism, reports continue to surface of provisioning problems, despite the recent levy to keep the troops better supplied.

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## PATROL REDDOUBLES HUNT FOR ZOVIVUS MENDU

*SELECT to learn more...*

### INVESTORS SOUGHT IN FISHING EXPEDITION

MARKET STREET, TARIS—Backers are being sought for a venture to return fleek eels from Hocekureem for the local restaurant trade. Baron Hieromam, a Snivvian industrialist recently arrived on Taris, began soliciting investors yesterday in the Market Street Outdoor Exchange.

"There's nothing like a good fleek eel dripping in pepper oil—and, as inhabitants of your good world know, there's nothing like that here on Taris," the baron said. Once a tanker is hired and crewed, he said, backers can expect a three-for-one return on investment within a year.

"Within eight months, I guarantee eel will be the taste of the moment for the finer palates in the Upper City. Don't let this chance slip away!"

The baron said that, owing to a delay in transferring his accounts from Cadomai, only hard currency is being accepted at this time. He can be reached by leaving a message in care of the night desk clerk at the Middle City's Junavex Hotel—"a family friend," according to the baron.

*SELECT to learn more...*

## TARIS PINS HOPES ON NEW JEDI CLASS

PATROL PLAZA, TARIS—With swoop-gang crime rampant in the Lower City, Taris officials increasingly looking towards another group of youths for possible relief: the five Padawans at the small satellite Jedi academy here.

The Padawans, should they become Knights, would traditionally be expected to be stationed to other systems. But while there is no agreement to the contrary, city officials—including the top law enforcement officer, Constable Sowrs—are hopeful the graduates will remain on duty here.

"They're already doing some policing as part of their training," Sowrs said. "If the number of Knights on Taris were to double overnight, it wouldn't trouble me in the least."

In a rare interview, the leader of the Jedi on Taris, Master Lucien Draay, spoke highly of the new class. Chief among the prospects are one of Taris' own, Shad Jelavan, a human orphaned two years ago after an accident claimed his parents' lives in the Middle City.

"Shad is the kind of apprentice every Master wishes he could have," Master Lucien said.

The other Padawans are Kamlin, the Falleen responsible for the capture of P'den Robalt; Gharr, one of the few Nagai Jedi candidates; Oojoh, the Ho'Din who brought down the Leverby smuggling ring; and Zayne Carrick, a human.

*SELECT to learn more...*

*(Read - Knights Of The Old Republic #1-6)*

## **The Secret Journal of Doctor Demagol**

**Entry #6062: *The crusaders.*** Two Republic vessels under Mandalorian control arrived from Suurja this morning, bearing large numbers of Jedi Knights, young and old. Capital!

Unlike the earlier pair, these were no unfortunates who wandered too close to the lines. No, they call themselves crusaders. Evidently an unauthorized probing force, sent to spy and rally the locals fighting against us. Well, they are in the hands of *our* crusaders now. They truly had no idea what numbers we had. Mand'alor hid our buildup on Onderon and Dxun well.

I recognized one of the warriors who brought them in. Not one of Fett's so-called Neo-Crusaders, but a fighter in the classic mold: "Rohlan the Runner," they call him. Just a shock trooper, really, but evidently a skilled one -- for they keep putting him back into action despite a tendency to dart off and nose into business that does not concern him. I even heard once he was asking questions about *me* -- though he said nothing in my presence today, and went about his business.

Strange. I would never give someone like that a second chance. But then Cassus is a soft-headed fool. Who knows what goes on in his mind?

No matter. It is a good day. The last time I had this many subjects was the Project on Osadia, years ago. I have *my* second chance -- provided these new arrivals live longer than my first two Jedi specimens did!

**Entry #6066: *Squint.*** I retract what I said about human Jedi. What a marvel this "Squint" is!

Irradiation. Electroshock. Even stress tests on the rack. All have been done, and yet his Jedi powers block out the pain. What a skill to be born with. If only my project had ended more happily -- what a force we could have been!

I've spared him the most invasive procedures. It seems a shame to kill him; he ranks more highly on the Wyrick Index than any of the others. And yet he endures all, wearing a look of sheer hate even I can recognize. I doubt cyborgs can clench their jaws as hard.



He was born hating Mandalorians, I can tell. Spawn of some world the Republic cared little for, now trying to *force* them to care. He welcomes war with us; he will start one, if he must. I cannot break him. He could leave today with little more than an elongated spine.

Which is why this must end in vivisection. I should not want to meet this one in a darkened alley.

*(Read - Knights Of The Old Republic #7-8)*

### **The Secret Journal of Doctor Demagol**

***Entry #6087: The Onslaught has begun.*** Mand'alor's "shadow war" is done, they say; the full-scale invasion of the Republic has been launched. Fine. More specimens for the taking.

But I worry the Republic will collapse before I can produce results. I have learned a great deal about Jedi physiology from the subjects here, supplementing what I learned on Osadia. We didn't have living adult Jedi to study on the New Generation Project -- just preserved genetic samples. But, thus far, knowing what a Jedi looks like on a molecular level has told me little about what *makes* one a Jedi. I am half-prepared to believe this "Force" is an actual external phenomenon.

Pulsipher is telling Mand'alor of my failings, I am sure. Often I have seen him skulking about, scribbling notes to send off. That is, when he is not in the lockdown ogling the Jedi's lightsabers. He acts as if some ancient spirit will rise from them to transform him into a Mandalorian Knight. Sheer fantasy.

I have seen his proposal to send an expedition to Taris to search for some fool artifact once we take the planet. If I did not fear endorsing his wild views before Mand'alor, I would happily add my blessings. Pulsipher, go dig a hole!

***Entry #6093: An interesting delivery.*** Curious thing: An Arkanian Offshoot woman has arrived, brought from Vanquo by the invasion force. Evidently, she is a Jedi.

I saw Offshoots all the time on Arkania, after the university was closed to species such as mine -- and of course, Offshoots were both researchers and *research subjects* on Osadia. But I have seen none since the Project collapsed years ago,

and my files on Offshoots were lost. I will run the full battery of tests on her when I am finished with Squint. There is much data to replace.

I hope she is a hardy specimen.

*(Read - Knights Of The Old Republic #9-10)*

### **The Secret Journal of Doctor Demagol**

**Entry #6107: Emergency!** This is Demagol, speaking into his personal recorder in the lab on Flashpoint. The Jedi subjects have taken control of the station!

I was ambushed -- struck from behind by Rohlan, the same runner I saw weeks ago. He must be in league with the Jedi now. I awoke in the storage area, stripped of armor. Our transmitter has been disabled -- and while the knights in the ready room are hardly in fighting condition, all the sentries appear to be gone. I can see the Jedi on the security monitor; it could be moments before they come for me.

I am downloading all my research files to the datachip hidden on my thumbnail. I will go down fighting, if I must; I am no stranger to combat. But I cannot fathom losing a *second* research station to a surprise attack, just like Osadia...

Osadia...

Hold.

That woman on the monitor. The Offshoot. I saw her again earlier today. I was busy, being hurried along by the traitor. But I remember. Her facial markings were strange, but she shared certain characteristics with the group of Offshoot research subjects on Osadia. She would have been a child back then. Could she have survived until now? She looks the right age.

Curse me! I have grown old and indolent. Comfortable in my surroundings -- when I should have brought her back for testing immediately!

But all may not be lost. I will *not* go down fighting -- but I will win nonetheless. There is an alternative.

Time is short. I must prepare.

**Entry #6108: [untitled]** This is Demagol speaking. This is a test recording.

Someone is moving again outside. Stand by.

**Entry #6109: In hiding.** It was a desperate ploy -- but it seems to have worked.

Squint and his crusaders thought they would bring the great Demagol before the Republic's inquisitors. Instead, they have carted away a metal shell holding the drugged body of the traitor, Rohlan, while I rest comfortably in his armor -- or as comfortably as is possible.

I am confined in a smuggling compartment aboard the junk-hauler that the runner arrived in. The Offshoot woman is aboard ship, as is the human Jedi male who accompanied the traitor. There may be others -- I cannot tell. The sound just now was a labor droid moving the container I am in.

It is not ideal, but then, the gambit was quickly worked. It does appear that Rohlan was in league with the boy Jedi, but only for the purpose of rescuing the Offshoot woman. (She, herself, does not seem to be a Jedi after all. Curious.) The boy tried to send me away with Squint, but I stowed away here instead.

I found that I had the ability to deactivate this helmet's external sound system and speak into its recorder, so I could continue my observations. None outside should hear me speak. I was also able to upload messages from my previous journal into the helmet's system.

I am not sure what to do. I would escape at the first opportunity, if not for the Offshoot woman. They call her "Jarael," a name I have never heard before. The chances seem remote that she is connected to my students from the Project, years ago -- but if she is, I must not be apart from her.

But neither can I reveal my presence and go to her. They may know this Rohlan well, and I am not sure I can manage a masquerade until I know more. I suppose I could simply kill her companions, although I wonder if that would make it difficult to earn her trust. People can be very particular about what happens to their associates, I have found.

There is time. I will meditate.

*(Read - Knights Of The Old Republic #11-12)*



## The Secret Journal of Doctor Demagol

**Entry #6124: Somewhere.** We have reached a port. Everyone has debarked but the droid -- it must be defunct, for it never moves. I seldom have the chance to leave this compartment for more than a few moments to look around. But the tinkering dotard who rarely leaves the cargo hold is gone tonight.

His presence concerns me. He is an Offshoot. If he is related to the woman, she cannot be anyone from the Project.

Worse, we now seem to be in the Republic. It is all noise and commotion outside. A change from the sound of my own voice, but not a good one. Mandalorians are likely unwelcome in the Republic, and I hesitate to shed armor and "blend in" not knowing where I am.

At least this compartment is fully stocked with provisions. I suspect I am living better than anyone else aboard this flying monstrosity.

**3963 bby**

### Labor Pains

*(After KOTOR : Reunion)*

If you're going to run from the law -- it doesn't much matter *whose* law -- I recommend Ralltiir. There, you never have to worry about where your next credit's coming from. Long before those Mandalorian guys started hassling the Republic, Ralltiir was the place where people came to make *bad* purchasing decisions. The blaster with the reversible handle came from Ralltiir. The sing-along hologram craze started on Ralltiir. I rest my case.

Thanks to the bucketheads, though, the planet was acting even more Ralltiirish than normal when I showed up. The helmet horde was still a long way off, but the sight of a Republic battlegroup forming in orbit had a lot of locals betting the other way, buying and selling as fast as they could. I don't blame 'em; Mandies just aren't as big on haggling as other tourists. The typical Mandalorian shopping spree, based on my limited experience, plays out about like this:

**Seller:** *"Welcome, armored friend. Would you like to see something in a luxury landspeeder?"*

**Mandalorian:** *"Copaani mirshmure'cye, vod? I free this merchandise for the Mando'ade!"*

**Seller:** *"Ouch. You are harming me. I say again, ouch."*

**Mandalorian:** *"You are a cowardly people, and this driver's seat does not recline enough."*

**Seller:** *"Pain. Pain and ouch."*

**Mandalorian:** *(drives off)*

So Ralitiir was in a mood to deal, on anything and everything. Now, normally, The Gryph -- that's me -- likes a good "Last Chance Sale." But, like I said, circumstances were requiring me to move fast to stay ahead of the authorities.

Now, a little of that is expected in my line of work. There was a study once that said 8.5% of all shipments delivered to Outer Rim spaceports never make it to their destinations. This time a year ago, I was the "point-five" where I lived -- with plans to become the "eight." Back then, a little notoriety was good for business -- and it helped that most species can't tell [Snivvians](#) apart, anyway. (If I thought it was bad when Mom couldn't tell my brother and me apart, it was only because I hadn't ventured offworld yet.)

Lately, however, I'd been traveling though space in an old junk-hauler with a couple of Arkanian Offshoots, including an old coot of an inventor who left his good sense in his other pants. And then there was my bodyguard of the hour, a human kid expelled from Jedi School and who was wanted on an impressive variety of charges, himself. The thing about Zayne Carrick --

-- but more about him later. Point is, we needed to travel as light as possible, and that made me a seller. Which, again, was not a problem, because Ralitiir was suddenly lousy with refugees fleeing inward from the conquered worlds, selling whatever they had on them to pay the way. There were plenty of locals with their credits out...

\* \* \*

...like *these* guys. I won't tell you how I found out about the Obohn Gallery of the Industrial Aesthetic -- protect the sources, y'know -- but I will say the curators were the *weirdest* couple of people I'd seen since breakfast. Dremullar Obohn di Garthos (ain't that a mouthful?) was the Muun, and he was Muun-ier than most.

Nearly twice my height with his non-existent nose stuck high in the air, he sort of drifted amid the metal statues of the gallery like he was one of them.

I don't think he ever would have made eye contact with me if not for the *other* guy, a fat Rodian in a hoverchair. He must have been older than -- well, there's never *been* anyone that old. You know those ancient cultures they always talk about, forging the galaxy and whatever? This Rodian was probably sitting in his chair then, bumping into things and saying, "Hey, guys, nice work on that star system. I mean, real nice."

Only they wouldn't have understood him, because I don't think *anyone* could have understood him. He only let out whispered squawks, and then only to the big Muun guy, who kept leaning over to tend to him like a beloved plant. The Rodian would gabble, and his scaly green jowls would shake. And Master Obohn (that's what he wanted to be called) would listen, and smile, and a little color would come into his face -- taking it from white to off-white. And eventually, his haughtiness turned to me.

"Father says you are here to sell some statuary."

"Pardon?"

"Statuary. Works of mechanical art, like those you see around you."

"I got that part," I said, looking around. "You mentioned your father."

"*This* is Father," the Muun said, gesturing to the Rodian, as if I should have known.

"*Your* father?"

"Father."

"Whatever." It just doesn't pay to find out too much about the mark as a person. Half the time you start to like them, and that makes them harder to con. The other half of the time, you just start to get confused. This fell within the other half. "I've just come from Taris," I said, getting on with it. "I've got some stuff that'll interest you."

"I highly doubt that," Obohn sniffed, which is the only word for it despite the fact that I had 100% of the nose in the conversation. "Taris is under siege by the Mandalorians."

That's exactly it, I said, beginning my play. "There are a lot of Tarisians in the the industrial sculpture scene, just like you." Obohn seemed to puzzle a moment at this, the concept of anyone being *just like him* understandably foreign. "A lot of good artists have been uprooted. You've heard of Adnah Tiblarett?"

"Tiblarett?"

"Tiblarett." I saw it on a door once in the Upper City.

"Never heard of her." Obohn clapped -- and two Wookiees quietly appeared from the back.

I don't know what caught me more off guard: Wookiees doing anything quietly, or the fact they were both dressed in vests, waistcoats, and pants. I realized I had come to the right place, as anyone rich enough to make Wookiees play dress-up is certainly worth my time. "A moment, master!" I said. "Sorry -- blast my poor Cadomai accent! I didn't mean Tiblarett. I meant... *uhhh*..."

"Teronto?"

"No."

"T'gronish?"

"No..."

"Not *Tikartine*?"

"Is she any good?"

"He."

"Is *he* any good?"

"*Any good*?" Obohn clutched at the sleeves of his robe. "I should say so! If you have work by *Ineas Tikartine*..."

"That's the one, then." *Eel in the snare*. "I've got Tikartines by the shipload." Obohn waved off the Wooks and turned back to Dad for another summit meeting -- longer, this time.

The good thing with fencing artwork is it's usually a one-customer kind of deal. It's not a bunch of transactions, which raises your overhead like crazy. Leave that

to the swoop gang newbies, hustling ryll a tube at a time. If they weren't wasting their own product on themselves, they'd still be in the hole for not counting their own labor costs. (I'll tell you, a good accountant and the Black Vulkars could start selling shares on the Coruscant Exchange.)

But I do digress: Obohn and his Ro-daddy were definitely interested. I thought the Rodian would rock off his chair -- and Obohn couldn't wait to prove to me he knew more than I did about Ineas what's-his-face. Which was fine by me, as I filled in the blanks. Yes, the poor, sad, reclusive sculptor was hard at work in his studio when the dastardly Mandalorians, whose idea of art is a sticker on a shoulder-pad, interrupted his genius. Only a lucky few escaped Taris -- including me and my junior associate, representatives bearing a few choice works to sell in order to raise money. With Obohn's help, Tikartine and his thirteen children might one day escape Taris -- to a place where, hopefully, he might continue to reshape hunks of shrapnel into works that captured the soaring spirit of an age.

Narrative established. Introduce product.

\* \* \*

A muffled thud resounded from the entrance to the gallery, followed by a less muffled and very un-Jedi-like epithet. (I suppose it would have been easier to introduce the product if I had left the doors open.) The Wookiees stepped forward to admit "my junior associate," pushing in two hovercarts piled high with the goods: agglomerations of gadgets and spare parts soldered together, some a couple of meters high.

Zayne deactivated the carts and slumped against the doorway, gasping as he flicked the sweat from his sandy hair. "You... didn't tell me .... about the *hill*."

I haven't had many henchmen in my time; one way or another, I've always tended to work alone. But there are times where a droid won't do as back-up, and when Zayne suddenly found himself out on the streets as a result of some unpleasantness, I saw a chance to expand my franchise. The kid was accused of something he didn't do -- and since I was caught up in it, too, I figured it would be interesting to see what a Knight (or an almost-one, like Zayne) could do on the grift. I'm like that: A lot of my colleagues hate the whole idea of Jedi Knights, seeing them as police that don't play fair. I see a profitable addition to the game. The power to influence the minds of the dim -- that's not far off *my* line.

So far, it was proving to be a mixed bag. Zayne wasn't exactly at the top of his Jedi class -- actually, if there was somebody worse, they probably sent him out for take-out and he never came back. Around me, his main knack seemed to be running into trouble. And everything was also turning into a negotiation.

Like with the hover-pallets. "I expected you ten minutes ago," I said. This was all I'd asked him to do. We've got a loader droid, but he's not much help. (That's another story.)

"Sorry," he said, gesturing toward the masses of bolted-together bric-a-brac. "There was a hill. And you said I should wait until *Camper* left the workshop."

Camper was the aforementioned Crazy Arkanian Offshoot, whose ship and mad-scientist lab *The Last Resort* was. I could see how it might take a while to shake him: Camper sometimes got caught up contemplating a rivet and would forget to eat. I was about to comment to that effect when I realized Obohn wasn't staring at the product, but, rather, *us*.

"You are the associate, human?" he asked Zayne.

"Guilty."

"You look like -- what's his name?" Obohn said. "The boy accused of killing the *Taris Four*. Zayne Carrick." He looked at me. "And he has that accomplice -- a Snivvian, like *you*."

"Well, that couldn't be the case," I said, "because I'm *his* boss." I reached up to slap my hand on the kid's shoulder. (He's too *tall*.) "Young Wervis here has been helping me since I adopted him. I freed the lad from a life of slave labor in a factory, skinning borrhats." Summon teardrop, one (1). "To tell you the truth, *I'm* like a father to *him*."

"Less is more, Gryph," Zayne mumbled.

"Hush, Wervis. I know it's a bad memory." Pathos sells. "Now, son, can you push the merchan-- I mean, the *masterworks* into the light?"

Under the skylight at the center of the gallery, the "Tikartine statuary" looked right at home. A little greasier than some of the other displays, maybe -- and ours had a few more blinking lights. But they certainly captivated Obohn and the Rodian, who circled the "machine art" and chattered back and forth to one another.

"What are these things you had me get, anyway?" Zayne whispered, looking at the larger metal mountain on the pallet.

"It appears to be a frammistat. Or a whingdoodle. Or perhaps a whatsis," I said. "They're scrap metal -- and when the money runs out, they're our next meal."

Before Zayne could ask anything else, Obohn turned back to us. "No," he said, "I'm not sure about these." Puttering up to his side, the Rodian squawked skeptically. (I think; probably any adverb would work.) Obohn declared for both of them that they wanted to wait until an authenticator arrived from Telerath. That was a few days out and too late for us.

Nonchalantly, I turned away. You know how those Verpine guys have the eyes on either side of their heads -- and you can never tell whether they're looking at you or your date? I went Verpine. One eye on the exit, the other on Zayne. "Kid," I whispered, "it's time for you to go into action."

Zayne bolted upright and drew his hand to the bulge in his jacket, defensively. "Not the *lightsaber*!"

"Spirits of Cadomai, *no*." Zayne has a thing against chopping innocent people into bits. I asked Obohn for a moment to confer with the kid and whisked him aside. "I need you to use your magic to convince these guys this junk is art!"

Zayne recoiled again. "I'm not sure I should--"

"What do *you* care?"

"I care about ripping people off."

"Well, so do I. It's settled."

"I mean, it *bothers* me to rip people off," he said.

"And it bothers *me* to hear you say that," I said. The Jedi ran him off -- and for this, he keeps to their way of doing things? Stunning. "Look, henchman, I don't mind you sitting in the corner of the cargo hold and doing your whole meditation thing. But when it's time to put on a show, you *leave* it in the cargo hold. Got it?"

He gave me the stare. I *hate* the stare.

"Come *onnnnn*," I said, tacking against the wind. "These guys are *ghouls*. They're trying to pick the bones of what's left of Taris for their own drawing rooms. They *deserve* to be scammed."

A pause. "I guess so."

He sighed. I sighed.

It's always like running two cons at once with this kid. I've got to scam the mark - while at the same time doing it in such a way that it doesn't get on Junior Saber-Twirler's nerves. I'll tell you, it's barely worth it.

Zayne straightened the collar on his jacket and went into action. "Excuse me, Master Obohn," he said, stepping up to one of our piles of junk and addressing the taller of the pair. "But you don't *need* to call an authenticator."

"I don't need to call an authenticator?" Obohn responded.

"These *are* authentic Tikartine sculptures," Zayne said.

"These *are* authentic Tikartine sculptures?"

The tone of voice is what always gets me. I'm immune to the dazzle stuff, and still, I nearly believed him.

But Obohn didn't. "Why should I take the word of a *boy* -- and a borrrat-skinner, to boot?" He called out a couple of names I didn't recognize; the well-dressed Wookiees, I guessed.

My eyes darted to Zayne, who shrugged. He'd said before it only works on the weak-minded -- and whatever else was wrong with Obohn, he felt strongly about his art. I looked again to the exit. Where were the Wookiees?

But we were all interrupted when the Rodian began pulling at Obohn's robe and clucking urgently. "What is it, Father?" Obohn asked -- followed by more squawks.

Getting the picture, Zayne knelt directly in front of the bloated, wrinkled Rodian. "He doesn't *need* to call an authenticator, does he?"

The Rodian quaked and quivered and gurgled another unintelligible response.



Obohn leaned in close. "What, Father? We don't *need* an authenticator?"

"These *are* authentic Tikartine sculptures," Zayne repeated.

"Gwawk gleep glorb snork snork!"

"Why, these *are* authentic Tikartine sculptures!" Obohn said, his face brightening to a high old shine as he stepped forward to shake my hand, violently. "I doubted you, but -- no detail escapes Father's eye!" (And no meal escapes his grasp, I thought. The Hutts should worry.) "They *are* authentic. We don't *need* an authenticator!" The Muun patted the shoulder of a surprised Zayne, still kneeling before the chattering Rodian. Zayne looked at me, a little bewildered. How could he influence somebody he couldn't *understand*?

I shrugged. Whatever happened, at least we had a good carnival act.

\* \* \*

I didn't let Zayne get too pleased with himself; we were about to talk money, that subject dearest to me and which no Jedi hoodoo can do much about. This is normally where I do pretty well on my own. But I'd had unexpected expenses on our last score, and knowing we'd need to get a new ship to replace *The Last Resort* set me off on the wrong foot. Most cons, I'll start at double what I want and feign the existence of another buyer. But I hadn't laid the groundwork for the ringer -- a big no-no. Speed kills deals.

And talking money evidently activated whatever ulcers Obohn had, because I saw his face twist and rumple until I could almost believe he and the Rodian were related. I had to climb down off the high price -- but as I did, I could tell it only fired up his doubts again. I hated for Zayne to see his Mastermind losing control of a scam like this, but I hoped it was educational. Undermine your price, undermine yourself.

"I'll tell you what I think," Obohn declared, robes feathering between the two hover-pallets as he struck a pose between them. "I think these sculptures are legitimate -- *but you two are not!*"

"Excuse me?"

"You two don't work for Tikartine. I don't think you know him at all," he said, producing a comlink from the folds of his sleeve. "You know, my brother-in-law is the constable of this planet. He might like a word with you."

Zayne began backing towards the door, but I stopped him. "Counterplay," I whispered. This is the mark trying to get us to abandon the goods. I wasn't going to live with a discount like that. "Oh, yeah?" I fired back at Obohn. "Well, I don't think your brother is really the constable of the planet!" So there.

"Father?" Obohn asked.

The old Rodian rumbled again, somehow activating a holoprojector on his chair. (Where do you get one of those?) A shimmering wedding party appeared before us -- a smiling Muun bride and her smiling Muun groom standing before *the entire smiling Ralltiiri police force*.

"Lovely bride," I gulped.

Obohn had only started to raise the comlink the half-kilometer to his face when an uninvited guest suddenly barged in.

I pause to note that this is something that seems to happen with Zayne, plenty, too. The last few weeks had been a sequence of sudden arrivals, big surprises, and stunning coincidences. It seems to be one of the Jedi gifts -- and if it is, all I can say is they should wrap it back up and return it to from whence it came, with no forwarding address. I'm a businessman -- I like to command a day like a ship of the line, using a calm, structured approach to everything. "Uninvited guests suddenly barging in" take that ship and give it mynocks and a reactor failure.

At least, this one certainly did: Camper, the afore-aforementioned grizzled owner of *The Last Resort*. By no means as ancient as the Rodian, but ancient enough -- and he could have given the Muun a run in the pale-complexion contest. I dug up Camper years ago, buried in Junk Junction in the Lower City of Taris; he wasn't much for conversation (except with himself), but his gadgets had sometimes come in handy. Traveling with him aboard his flying trash compactor these last few weeks, I determined my view of him was overrated. He had two settings: pattering or sputtering.

"*Rodent!*" Guess which one he was in now. "Yeah, I found you," Camper yelled, charging into the gallery. "Sendin' the boy to do your thievin', that's just like you."

Zayne looked at me as Camper approached the hoverpallets. "Gryph, you -- you told me he'd okayed me taking this stuff from his workshop," the kid said, forgetting Obohn was there.

I didn't forget. "Quiet," I said, bringing him closer. "How was I supposed to know he'd miss anything?" You should see the workshop -- the cargo hold -- we're talking about. We hit an asteroid once. It straightened things up.

Whisker-to-whisker with me, Camper wasn't going to let it go. "He's a thief. He's always been a thief." And he didn't care who knew it -- which went without saying, because he was already bellowing it. "Well, you're gonna push these right back, you hear me?"

"Camper, we're in the middle of a sensitive negotiation here."

"You just negotiate your way back to the ship. I was workin' on those."

"Since when has anything you've built worked? And how is it you only manage to be sane at the wrong--"

*"Enough!"*

\* \* \*

That last hadn't come from me, Zayne, or Camper -- but rather Master Obohn, who'd apparently had just about exactly what he said. He called forth his dapper Wookiees. "Get them out of my gallery -- *all of them!*"

At this point, I realized the operation had begun to slip out of my control.

I also realized that, if ever anyone wanted to invade Kashyyyk, the proper strategy would be to tell everybody there that slacks were in style for that season. Because while I would normally never choose to be on the same planet with a couple of angry Wookiees, angry Wookiees in pants tend to lose a bit of their effectiveness as killing machines.

At least, I was able to dodge -- barely -- the one who came after me, which would have been impossible save for their tailor's generosity with the pleats. Hairball would get a good run at me and would suddenly pop his seams, slowing him down. The gallery's displays made for some good cover, at least at the start -  
- until they started knocking them over.

Zayne was handling himself pretty well, too, during this time. He was still cautious about tipping his hand at the Jedi thing -- the saber stayed tucked away, and while some of the statues kind of took on a mind of their own when his Wookiee got too close, I'm not sure it was obvious.

Camper pretty much didn't move during any of this; he just kept fiddling with one of his widgets on one of the hover-pallets. I didn't see this, but Zayne tells me at one point a Wookiee came too close to Camper, and he turned part of the gadget on. The result was one knocked-out rug on the floor, shocked silly by something in our fake statue.

I would have liked to have seen that -- or, better, seen him do it to the other Wookiee -- but at the time I was occupied with my screaming. My Wookiee had shed his threads once and for all, and was immodestly clawing at the tallish statue I was perched atop. He kept trying to climb it, and every time Zayne would come near him, he'd let go and the whole production would start rocking back and forth.

It wasn't my closest call of the month, but this spot in my memory wasn't going to get a lot of visits.

Fortunately, we heard it again: "*Enough!*" Saved by the Muun. Seeing parts of his collection in jeopardy (and other parts in pieces), Obohn called his Wookiee off. Reluctantly, the Wookiee released the statue -- and more reluctantly, I followed it to the ground with a horrific crash.

By the time Zayne collected me from the marble floor, Obohn was still surveying the damage. The Rodian, unscathed, was having a good cry, which also drew the Muun's attention. This gave Zayne and me a chance to push Camper towards the door -- and something that made the moment as painful for me as it was for the collectors.

I'd cut him in.

I did so with grace and resignation. "Listen, you addled freak! These guys are patent agents for a major multi-galactic conglomerate, and for some reason neither of us can understand, they are interested in your inventions. Let us make the sale, and we'll all be happy!"

Camper raised a furry eyebrow. "They'll pay me."

"They'll pay *us* -- finder's fee, here. But yes."

Camper chewed his tongue. "They're not Adascorp. Because I hate Adascorp."

"They're not."

"An' Vanjervalis ripped me off some years ago."

"Not them, either. Anybody else you won't work for?"

He puckered. "Lemme think, now. There's a few."

"Well, it's not them, either! Now get out of here so we can close the deal!"

Together, Zayne and I forcibly shoved him out the door. For good measure, I watched him shamble down the hilly street that led out of town and back to *The Last Resort*.

\* \* \*

I don't know how much Obohn and the floating ventriloquist's puppet heard of our conference, but my heart sank as I saw they were approaching us, excitedly conferring, too. "This can't be good," Zayne whispered.

"You don't fool me," Obohn said, fingering his comlink with his bony fingers. "*I know who you really are!*"

Instinctively, Zayne reached for his jacket again. He's raised a good sweat in the chase, and was flustered. To be identified as the wanted Padawan now...

"I know who you really are -- and I know who *that* was," he said, cracking a smile that Muun shouldn't smile. "You *are* thieves -- and that man was *Ineas Tikartine!*"

"Come again?"

While Zayne and I looked at each other, Obohn paced around us. "That man you shoved out of here -- I heard part of what he said. Those are *his* works -- and you two stole them!"

I saw it: Again with the comlink -- and the brother-in-law, and the wedding guests. Here it comes.

But Obohn simply pocketed the comlink and walked away.

"So..."

"So you're not going to call the authorities?" Zayne asked, putting a finer point on it than I was planning to.

"Of course not," Obohn said, his expression softening. He motioned for the standing Wookiee, who repaired to a hallway and returned with a large case. Just from the heft, I could tell what was in it -- and how much. Local hard currency. Ralltiiri Colonials, flippable for Republic credits just about anywhere. And more importantly -- about twice as many as I'd originally asked for.

I was nearly out the door with said case when Zayne, as usual, looked into the face of good fortune and poked it in the eye.

"Let me get this straight," Zayne asked Obohn, befuddled. "When you thought we didn't really know the artist, you were going to have us arrested. But now that you think we've *stolen* them -- you're willing to pay *double*."

"Yes," Obohn said, matter-of-factly stroking the "sculptures" with newfound admiration. "But it's not just that they're stolen. They're stolen -- and *the artist knows they're missing*." The Rodian burred with excitement and evident agreement. "These pieces are *much* more desirable in our circles, now. Much, *much* more. *Much more*."

"That's what I thought," Zayne said. A groan, before slouching off.

It really is better not to ask.

\* \* \*

We didn't talk much as we headed down the hill. I kept stopping to recount the cash -- and, I'll admit it, to just *look* at it -- and Zayne would find a tree to lean against and mope. I know Jedi are big on law and order and all, but after all that's happened to the kid, I swear you'd expect him to come at the galaxy a little less wide-eyed. I see people that are greedy and shameless -- and I see opportunity. What does Zayne see? I haven't figured that out yet.

For whatever reason, he took some kind of consolation in insisting that Camper get some of the money, like I promised. I'll admit I thought about catching him in one of his addled moments and giving him a bag of empty food-paste tins. I'm sure I could have thought of something. But it had been a profitable day, and I could afford to be magnanimous. (I'd just find something to sell Graybeard, anyway, to get it all back.)

Which brings me back to the advice I was giving. If you're an operator like me and you're considering bringing a Jedi into the organization, compromises like that are just going to be part of the package. Paying people. Picking marks that

deserve to be cheated. Rounding corners you'd rather cut. They're all part of the care and feeding of a Jedi henchman.

It can be a tough haul -- in my case, it already has been. But I've been playing a hunch all along that it'll be worth it. And who knows? Just maybe, I can bring him along to my way of thinking on a few scores -- and *make* a few scores, while we're at it.

Mixed-up kid, that Zayne. But I'll make something out of him yet!

### **The Secret Journal of Doctor Demagol**

***Entry #6130: Another planet.*** The boy -- they call him Zayne -- seems to be no Jedi, after all, but some kind of reject. He is moving around junk at the bidding of a Snivvian. I have always wondered what happens to Jedi who fail to reach knighthood. It appears they are made to become orderlies for smugglers. A strange practice.

Does something inside separate a failed Jedi from a successful one? An apt question. He will be interesting to dissect, should the opportunity arise.

# THE ADMIRAL'S LIST

THE OFFICIAL COMMUNIQUÉ FROM THE REPUBLIC NAVY

## ADMIRAL VELTRAA REMEMBERED

JIMAS VELTRAA MEMORIAL EDITION

### *Hero of Taris feted in Coruscant ceremony*

Admiral Jimas Veltraa, who perished in the defense of Taris against the surprise advance of Mandalorian forces along three fronts (now known by the popular media as "The Onslaught"), was memorialized in a service at Admiralty Plaza on Coruscant.

When the Jebble-Vanquo-Tarnith line became indefensible, Veltraa heroically reformed remnants of the Outer Rim fleets into a line protecting Taris. Veltraa died when his flagship, *Reliance*, was destroyed with all hands lost. Speaking at the memorial service, the Chancellor credited Veltraa's sacrifice with delaying the Mandalorians' siege of Taris, which is still ongoing.

Discussion had been given to rechristening the new class of warship, recently approved for construction in the spaceyards at Corellia, in honor of the late admiral. However, the Chancellor spoke in favor of the original name, *Interdictor*-class, which Veltraa himself had proposed.

Admiral Saul Karath, whose strong defense of and escape from Vanquo resulted in his recent promotion, was not able to attend but sent a message honoring the late Admiral and dedicating his upcoming campaign to Veltraa's memory.

*SELECT to learn more...*

### STATUS OF FRINGERS DISPUTED

Admiral Noma Sommos, inactive since her injuries following the collapse of the line on the Outer Rim, filed an official complaint from her field hospital at Wayland over the growing presence of fringers, or freelance tradespeople, in naval groups.

"The combat and spacelift duties of the navy are inconsistent with providing protection for irregular and unaffiliated units," the complaint read.

Provisioning problems for ground units had begun to attract more fringers even before the Mandalorian onslaught. Sommos cited the logistical complications of running a modern navy in her request to the Republic for relief.

"Fringers will always be with us as long as there are armies to feed," said Catronus Steffans, defense official for the Republic. "The greater question is whether we wish to abandon the commercial opportunities this Republic is known for in the name of military expedience. We must remember what we're fighting for, after all."

*SELECT to learn more...*

### PROMOTIONS LIST

In addition to the already-reported promotion of Saul Karath of the *Courageous* to Rear Admiral, the latest promotions were handed down from the Republic Navy, including many official confirmations of field promotions assigned during the Onslaught.

#### To Captain:

Teelo Vang, of Coruscant  
Bask Modl, of Bestine

#### To Commander:

Dias Athacorr, of Arkania  
Owen Delstar, of Coruscant

#### To Lieutenant:

Jerrit, of Mon Calamari  
Carth Onasi, of Telos  
Rutu, of Moltok

*SELECT to see more...*



SAUL KARATH  
Rear Admiral



(Knights Of The Old Republic #14)

# THE ADJUDICATOR

The Freelance Security Professional's Holoteen

Special Report: The Outer Rim

## KRAV'S HOT LIST

*They're hot—and they're worth a lot!*

Got some decent picks this week to add to the list, plus the same-old-same-old.



### Zayne Carrick

Bounties: Nine, totaling 61,000 credits  
Wanted for: Murder, treason, destruction of property, traffic infractions

Status on some of those bounties is iffy (see column this issue) but we hear a Coruscant player may step in and guarantee the ones in doubt. Not how I'd spend it, but hey, it's your money...



### Marn Hierogryph

Bounties: Seven, totaling 24,000 credits  
Wanted for: Accomplice to murder, treason, destruction of property, racketeering, fraud

Sightings of "The Gryph" are so common, it's almost not worth talking about. Seems like all the Snivvians in the galaxy comb their hair the same way.



### Kelven Garnatrope

Bounties: Three, totaling 38,000 credits  
Wanted for: Murder

They say he's the "Corellian Strangler," but I'll believe it when they can get a decent picture for us to go on. How are we supposed to catch this guy, start checking I.D.s?



### Baron Hyro Margryph

Bounties: One, totaling 100,000 credits  
Wanted for: Who cares?

New to the list is this guy: only got the name and image. An Arkanian offshoot—no idea what he did. Doesn't look too dangerous, but the money's amazing and the issuer looks solid. This fossil's buried treasure!

## OUTER RIM BOUNTIES: STILL ANY GOOD?

*Mandie assault ruins it for the rest of us*

By KRAV NOBLIS, Adjudicator Editor

And we thought the Jedi were spoilsports.

With the Mandalorians gobbling up Republic worlds on the Outer Rim, it's not just hurting the freelancers who work there. Many of the perps on the run in Republic territory (or, at least, what's Republic territory for the moment) are only valuable to parties that now have other things to worry about.

The most glaring example is Zayne Carrick, the Padawan who, with his accomplice Marn Hierogryph, whacked the rest of his class on Taris. The biggest of the bounties was guaranteed by the Taris Chamber of Commerce, which, last this reporter heard, was in danger of some serious Mandalorian redecoration. You can't very well cough up the credits with a bomb dropped in your lobby!

Don't get me wrong—I still wouldn't turn down a chance to nab either one of 'em, though. There's more than enough cash put up on Coruscant alone. But on a Zavivus Mendu, forget it. I'm not in this for my health!

It's worse than you may think. I was trying to turn in a sniveling executive-type perp on Wayland the other day, when who should I see in the hallway of the constabulary but the Constable—carrying boxes to the exit, and leading what looked like his whole family. Seeing the guy was busy, I just asked for a voucher to take to the Uhosan Industries building. No joy! It's full of Basilisks, he says. Industrial espionage just ain't the big problem it once was for them!

Until lately, our trade's had a good run. When guys like the Moomo Brothers can get work, anybody can. But if the Mandies keep knocking off the customers, those times may be over. The bucketheads seem to like to chase their own baddies well enough. Almost makes you think a Mandalorian would make a decent bounty hunter, if circumstances were different!

**SELECT to learn more...**





## NO END IN SIGHT FOR MANDALORIAN SIEGE

More kilotons of destructive force rained down on Taris today, as yet another Mandalorian Dreadnaught joined the offensive in orbit. The most intense bombardment in weeks left several heretofore-untouched sectors of the Middle City in ruins.

Losses included the historic Lhosan Industries plant near Machineville, known throughout the riding community as the "birthplace of the swoop-bike." Abandoned by the manufacturer in the run-up to the siege, many beings had taken refuge inside its cavernous walls. Loss of life is estimated to be high.

Sorties of planetary defense fighters continued to scream skyward throughout the night, again meeting with defeat as they reached the Mandalorian perimeter. Sources with the Home Guard reported that the planet may soon have to turn to law enforcement vehicles for defense, although military sources with the Republic denied the story.

Speaking remotely, Republic defense official Catronus Steffans took time in his news conference about the Serroco tragedy to spare a few words for Taris. "It is when the Republic faces its greatest tests that the true spirit of our people shines through—whether in responding to the horrific crime of Serroco, or in defending our homes on Taris."

*SELECT to learn more . . .*

## WHO LOST TARIS?

### AN EDITORIAL BY THE PUBLISHER

The story, by now, is an old and familiar one to anyone who's lived through it: Three years ago, with the Mandalorians beginning to threaten Taris's resource worlds of Vanquo, Tarnith, Suurja, and Jebble, the Republic suddenly changed its policy and offered protection to a world on the Outer Rim.

No matter that the number of vessels needed to extend such protection far outstripped what the Republic had to offer. Money talks—and it did. Lhosan Industries convinced the Republic to give membership to our tiny island on a remote stellar sea—and its go-between with the Senate, Gorravus, became our first Senator himself as payment for his efforts. "Payment" may once have seemed a strong term—but it hardly matters now, with Mandalorian bombs falling.

Bombs, which could not be stopped by a Republic Navy, spread too thin. Nor by well-meaning Jedi such as the Revanchist leader, who only too late proved that the threat we faced was real. Nor by Lhosan chairman Jervo, who had once seemed to care so much about protecting his interests here—only to pull his company offworld before the Mandies even showed up. Nor by Senator Gorravus—who had begun to evolve into a true champion for Taris's cause, only to disappear before the shooting started . . .

*SELECT to learn more . . .*

## HYSTERICS AMID THE HYSTERIA

A lighter moment in the darkness came yesterday when observers reported a comical sight in the Middle City.

A city surveillance droid, its logic center unable to integrate the recent events with its customary duties, attempted to issue a parking citation to an unexploded Mandalorian bomb.

No one was injured in the ensuing blast, which was said to have lightened the hearts of overworked rescuers nearby. "Wished I'd seen that sight a thousand times before," said one, who asked not to be named.

*SELECT to learn more . . .*

## The Secret Journal of Doctor Demagol

**Entry #6144: An important day.** The Offshoot woman knows I am here. I spoke with her.

I had seen she was parting company with the boy and the Snivvian; they were left behind, much to my relief. Only she, the old man, and the useless droid remain aboard. Useless enough -- it failed to protect her from an assassin droid, evidently dispatched here to claim the old man. I emerged from hiding just in time to save her. She does seem to be a talented warrior -- I could be right about her after all!

I would like to reveal my true identity to her, but first I must know more about her background. What she has been doing all these years? If she really is from my Project, she should know who I am -- but she might not be favorably disposed toward me. Certainly Osadia was left in a shambles. If she has grown up resenting me, she may not share what she knows about other survivors, if they exist. Oh, I can certainly extract whatever answers I need easily enough -- but I would rather she told me willingly. The information is likely to be more accurate.

So I was pleased to discover that the modulator in the helmet does a fair job of disguising my voice. The woman's knowledge of the runner Rohlan seems to be minimal, though I fear to remove my faceplate before her or the old man.

He is ailing, but it is unclear to me what he suffers from. I have not practiced much as a healer since my first tenure with the Mandalorians. He does not appear related to the woman, which is a relief.

Perhaps he will die soon. I might speed that along, if it comes to it.



# THE ADMIRAL'S LIST

THE OFFICIAL COMMUNIQUE FROM THE REPUBLIC NAVY

## HOPE FADES FOR SERROCO SURVIVORS

REMEMBER SERROCO! EDITION



*Number rescued  
unchanged;  
escapees under fire*

Recent days have yielded little hope for additional survivors from the cowardly Mandalore's incineration of the Republic forces building on

Serroco. No new vessels have arrived in Republic space, and the group returning with Admiral Saul Karath continues under fire (see dispatch).

Meanwhile, the Admiral of the Fleet signaled his intention to lodge an official protest with the Republic over the army's positioning of forces near Serrocan population centers.

"No one acquainted with the rules of war could have expected the shocking and abhorrent acts of the abomination called Mandalore," said Catroerus Steffans, Republic defense official. However, with such populated worlds as Telerath, Ralltiir, and Arkania potentially under threat next, Steffans indicated that future policy was under review.

[Click here to learn more.](#)

### CASUALTY LIST

Here are the latest confirmed additions to the record of ships lost at Serroco:

#### SERVICE:

*Perspicacity*, Cruiser  
CX-03, Cargolift Vessel  
CX-09, Cargolift Vessel  
CX-14, Cargolift Vessel

#### CIVILIAN:

*Queen of Taris*, spaceliner  
*Little Bivoli*, fringe supply vessel  
*Grubstake*, fringe supply vessel

## DISPATCHES FROM THE FRONT

*Admiral Karath fights to elude his pursuers*

The following dispatch arrived from the *Couragous* battle group two days ago to the Admiral of the Fleet on Coruscant:

Sir,

I have the duty and the grave responsibility to report to you the disposition of my forces, still under pursuit on the lanes from Serroco to Telerath.

Since departing Serroco, our ranks have been reduced to [force disposition classified]. I am hopeful that we will be able to make Myrkr or the Ryyk Nebula, where we might reform with the Tremendous group arriving from [point of origin classified].

I should like to commend Lieutenant Carth Onasi, whose swift thinking has been a service to the fleet. The conduct of Commander Dallan Morvis has also been exemplary. I also appreciate your forwarding my message, submitted in my last dispatch, to the Jedi order.

I regret that I cannot make a more detailed report, but we have repeatedly been called upon to defend the flotilla. I have pledged not to allow any of the ships escaping the cauldron of Serroco to fall prey to the Mandalorians without a fight.



Yours in duty,  
**SAUL KARATH**  
Republic Ship *Couragous*

## The Secret Journal of Doctor Demagol

***Entry #6168: I am a colossal fool!*** We have returned to Arkania, where I studied, so long ago. The woman was insistent upon finding some remedy for the old man's condition. And, blast me, I encouraged it, not realizing that, in trying to win her trust, I would set her on a course I could not follow. Now, she has gone to the surface to find her answers, leaving me to mind the old man.

I know what I was thinking. She will not tell me of her past -- and so I need genetic tests to see if she came from my project, years ago. The Arkanians can do them. But I cannot let the Arkanians know what *she* is, either, or I will lose her, so I must run the tests myself. But I cannot set foot in armor on a Republic world, any more than I can show my face to her. I am trapped in my own devices. What madness I have created!

I know she will return -- she says she would never abandon the old man. But she has been gone long.

The old man sounds as though he is regaining consciousness. If he does not know more about her past, I may simply be done with him now...

(Knights Of The Old Republic #17)



## FISCAL PERIOD FINANCIAL REPORT AND OUTLOOK

### Message from the Chief Executive

*Arkoh, the Eighth Lord Adasca*

On behalf of the employees and managers of **The Adasca BioMechanical Corporation of Arkania**, it is my great pleasure to welcome all readers to the Adascorp financial report.

The devastating surprise attack by the Mandalorians on the Republic contributed to much instability during this financial period, affecting not simply our own business operations, but the lives of many of the customers for our products. Nevertheless, through the diligence of management and our devoted employees, Adascorp managed to **meet or exceed all financial targets** for the period in every sector in which it operates.

The **medical services** division of Adascorp continued its market leadership, expanding its research into battlefield prosthetics and genetic manipulation. New viral therapy products continued to show promise. And sales of automated field hospitals and medical droids to the Republic reached an all-time high.

As there are healers, so are there warriors—and Adascorp's new **Military Research and Development Division** released a number of new products to market. More than half of our Adascorp-branded armament revenue came from the sale of battle-droid artificial musculature components to the Republic. Adascorp researchers first recognized the synergies between medical prosthetics and droid manufacture, and the frontiers of this promising field continue to be explored.

Our **financial services** continued to expand in the period just ended. The opening of the **Adascopolis Financial Exchange** promises to move the center of commercial gravity closer to the Colonies.

And our pending purchase of much of the Draay Trust's share of the **Telerath Interstellar Banking Initiative** at market price gives the Corporation controlling interest in an enterprise which is clearly the wave of the future for personal banking in the galaxy.

The **mining sector** continued to face a challenging environment, owing to declining Arkanian gem production, the siege of Taris, and the loss of operations on Vanquo. But our ongoing dispatch of droid-operated mining stations to systems inhospitable for organics continues to show promise. The uptick in military ship-building also promises to fuel growth in our materials processing operations.

Even in these uncertain times, my confidence in the Corporation's future is high. So high that I have personally authorized **the purchase of 17 billion shares** to add to the Adasca family's controlling interest, thus protecting, for all investors, the share price against the current instability. We all look forward to happier—and more profitable—days ahead.

Very best to yours,

**ARKOH, Lord ADASCA**  
Chief Executive Officer

[SELECT to see Financial Summary Statement](#)

[SELECT to see Business Environment and Risk Assessment](#)

[SELECT to see Individual Sector Drilldowns](#)



The Corporation ["The Adasca BioMechanical Corporation of Arkania," herein known as "Adascorp"] affirms that all information appearing in the summary and attached report is true to the best of the knowledge of all Officers of the Corporation, and does not omit any facts material to the information presented. Disclosures made herein are in full accordance with the Coruscant Financial Exchange Establishment Act and all its codicils. However, the Corporation cautions that affirmations in this report relating to future results and conditions are forward-looking statements based on The Corporation's educated expectations. Actual results in future timeframes could differ materially from projections in those forward-looking statements due to changes in the business environment's risk quotient. For a discussion of factors affecting the Corporation's risk quotient, see Attachment 6A.



## The Secret Journal of Doctor Demagol

***Entry #6174: Calamity compounds calamity.*** This journey grows ever more difficult. Somehow, the old man has earned the attention of the Adascas, lords of Arkania -- and the Offshoot woman and I have been sucked into it. I sit imprisoned aboard their colossal research ship.

I cannot afford to let them see my face, either. I studied in their universities, long ago. My research interests are known to them. Finding me in Mandalorian armor now would raise too many questions, before I am ready to provide "Jarael" any answers.

Someone approaches. I do not know how long I can keep this up.

(Knights Of The Old Republic #18)

# THE TARIS HOLOFEED

## INVASION EDITION



This is the report from the scene here in the Upper City. After seemingly endless days under the siege of orbiting forces above, the Mandalorians began landing in the polar areas of the planet late last night! Other incursions in the equatorial regions followed, and at this hour they very nearly appear all over the map. It's difficult to say—the last report from the civil defense holofeed came hours ago, and we've been relying on everything from weather sensors to word of mouth.

The reader will forgive any lapses in journalistic standards. The Mandalorians have just landed at Highpoint, and the offices which source this Holofeed there were struck two days ago by some kind of explosive. Since that time—not counting a nervous night hiding in the back room of Kebla Yurt's Equipment Emporium—this reporter and staff have been stationed at the Senatorial Suite of the Junavex Hotel.

The choice wasn't made from avarice—it provides a good view of the city and its construction is sound—though your correspondent will admit to some intentional irony. Many exclusive haunts previously off-limits to normal folk sit completely abandoned today—and, of course, our own senator has been missing since the weeks following the Padawan Massacre. Wherever you are, Gorra-vus, we're keeping an eye on the place for you!

Mandalorian shock troopers can now be seen on the streets of the Upper City, and armored figures astride metal horrors called basilisks can be seen darting through the city canyons toward the regions below. Reports say Cassus Fett is running the show, and if so, he's doing it with macabre efficiency. The taking of Market Street this morning barely gave a moment's respite between the looters leaving and the invaders arriving!

At least the swoop gangs had the decency to fire a few parting shots at the Mandies before streaking back to their holes. It's more than the Republic has done. Even before the Republic announced Taris "indefensible," they weren't able to do much. For weeks, people on Taris have asked why the Republic would invite the planet to join if it didn't intend to protect them. It's plain now. They didn't want you, Master and Mistress Taris—they wanted your business!

They say the Chancellor has launched an investigation into how Taris got fast-tracked into the Republic in the first place. This reporter has a few choice words for any investigator who decides to drop in. But it's already a busy day for visitors!

Where will the Mandalorians stop? What do they want? Taris has asked for weeks! Report is that they're asking it tonight on Telerath. Serroco asked and never found out! They could be asking soon on—where? Arkania? Ralltiir? Alderaan? And where else? Who can understand the—

Flash! There are reports of Mandalorians in the building! Middle floors, roof. We're sealing the door, will try to hold out! Does anyone know if Mandies take prisoners? They're close now. Voices in a strange language. Blasters going off! There's nowhere to move, so this broadcast will continue until th—

### TRANSMISSION INTERRUPTION

NO SIGNAL

NO SIGNAL

NO SIGNAL

\*\*\*\*\*



## The Secret Journal of Doctor Demagol

**Entry #6181: *Stranger and stranger*.** The lord of this vessel has freed me and given me access to one of his laboratories -- in exchange for my sending a secret invitation to Mand'alor.

I was tempted to refuse. Adasca is of the same racist family that drummed me into the streets, years ago. I have never understood discrimination against other species; in fact, it is the comparative differences that make beings so interesting to study. Pity the poor researcher who works only with a homogenous population. My laboratory welcomes all. Before my blade, all are equal!

But sending the message is exactly what I wanted to do. Speaking in code, I informed Mand'alor that I yet lived, in the guise of the runner. He was pleased to hear it -- far more so, no doubt, than Fett! I also said I had a great discovery at hand. Mand'alor will surely come.

In the meantime, Adasca has actually *given* me the chance I had no prospect of earlier: lab access. Here, working alone, I can determine once and for all whether the Offshoot woman is, indeed, from the New Generation Project. It will take time -- I have only the strand of hair I found on her pillow while she was away. But I remember most of the genetic markers to look for. How could I forget?

(Knights Of The Old Republic #19)

# ADASCORP

FISCAL PERIOD FINANCIAL REPORT AND O

## FIELD REPORT: "PROJECT BLACK H MOST SECRET!

(CONTINUED from file 2342/6)

**ARTONIAN DOBONOLD**, director, Resea

Are you saying your original projections were off?

**GORMAN VANDRAYK**, lead Project scientist: If anything, they were too low.

**DOBONOLD**: I find that hard to believe.

**VANDRAYK**: That's two of us. But it's right there in the numbers.

**DOBONOLD**: To believe this, we've have to accept that the slugs—the Exorgoths—can consume their own weight six times in a standard day!

**VANDRAYK**: With the hunger center stimulated, yes, sir.

**DOBONOLD**: That's incredible.

**VANDRAYK**: But the beastie's growing the whole time, so that mass value keeps changing. If you set up a differential equation—(continues inaudible)

**ARGALOH**, the **SIXTH LORD ADASCA**: Is this really important?

**DOBONOLD**: No, milord. To the point, Vandrayk.

**VANDRAYK**: I mean if you hit both the growth centers and the fission centers at once, you've got this many in a month—and they'd consume this much mass. (Refers to Table 12 attached to OBH file 2342)

**ADASCA**: (gasps)

**VANDRAYK**: They're somethin', all right.

**DOBONOLD**: We're looking at possible uses in industrial waste cleanup, milord.

**VANDRAYK**: Just lead 'em to it. My notes on the drive system and control units are back on my survey ship. I can get them—

**ADASCA**: Wait a minute, offshoot. Are you saying we could grow a fleet of these things? Send them wherever we want?

**VANDRAYK**: As long as you're not picky about them destroying everything when they get there.

**ADASCA**: (pause, then strikes table) They're perfect!

**VANDRAYK**: I don't understand.

**ADASCA**: Are you blind?

**VANDRAYK**: Sir?

**ADASCA**: With those ugly eyes of yours, are you *blind*? Because you must not see the *war* going on around us. Trade curtailed. Customers and Arkanians alike affected. (Scattered sounds of agreement.) And now the greatest Arkanian of all, Arca Jeth, laid low by this nonsense!

**DOBONOLD**: Master Jeth protect us!

**VANDRAYK**: But these are living things. They don't *mean* to hurt anyone. They're—

**ADASCA**: They're our *property*, right?

**VANDRAYK**: (inaudible)

**ADASCA**: It's like I was telling little Arkoh: "The truth must be infrared." Because the offshoots can never see it! (scattered laughter)

**DOBONOLD**: What do you have in mind, milord?

**ADASCA**: It's simple. We—is something wrong, Vandrayk?

**VANDRAYK**: Can I be excused? I—uh—want to get those files I left on the survey ship.

**DOBONOLD**: Be back quick, Vandrayk. Don't camp out up there like the last time.

**VANDRAYK**: Uh ... yeah... (trails off, inaudible)

Lord Adasca,  
Here's the transcript you requested from Vandrayk's last briefing before he left our service 33 years ago. There are no holos of the briefing due to the sensitive nature of the subject, but you'll see your late grandfather was in attendance.

## The Secret Journal of Doctor Demagol

**Entry #6208: *Too close for comfort.*** Mand'alor has arrived -- but so, too, has Squint. Seeing him again, fit and able, was most uncomfortable. But he appeared not to recognize me. It is strange: the more I try not to be Demagol, the more these supposedly perceptive Jedi believe me. Odd.

They have all come running to bargain with Adasca over some discovery the old Offshoot discovered. (It *is* interesting, but ultimately a sideshow next to what I may have found.) Now they kiss the Arkanian's boot and grovel. Jedi and Mandalorian -- not so much different, after all!

While I was pleased to see Mand'alor, I increasingly lose patience with the Mandalorians. Evidently Cassus has worked the story of the runner Rohlan's demise into some kind of propaganda folk tale. No songs are sung of Demagol in Fett's cadres, I assume!

They arrived so quickly I was unable to finish my analysis. Both sides want me at this charade as interlocutor, but I cannot wait to return to the lab. If the Offshoot woman is not one of my past test subjects, I can take this opportunity to return with Mand'alor.

But if she *is*...

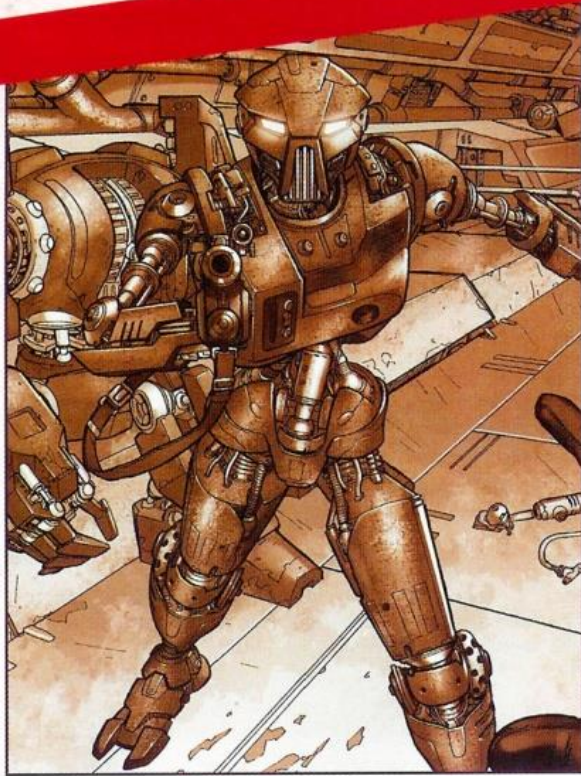
(Knights Of The Old Republic #20)



# THE ADJUDICATOR

The Freelance Security Professional's Holofeed

Special Report: Tools of the Trade



## AVOID THE DROID

Leave bounty hunting to the organics  
By KRAV NOBLIS, Adjudicator Editor

I hate droids. Is that okay? Can I say that without getting hate messages from some "Be Nice to Your Appliance" association? But I only hate *specific* droids—those that take jobs away from hard-working security pros.

I hear you—"droids are just another tool of the trade." They can serve as armed backup for a smart bounty hunter—and they rarely moan about their cut. My gripe is with this latest wave of "autonomous" droids—whose goal-seeking programs seem calculated to seek my livelihood!

A while back, I decided to go out and have a look for that high-priced artifact, Baron Hyro Margryph. No sooner did I hit the Inner Rim than I'm up to my fuzzy pointed ears in HK-24 droids, apparently all out on the same assignment!

Then all of a sudden, they canceled the bounty—made me sick to think of all that money going to waste. As Zax the Hutt used to say, an oil bath and a pat on the shiny head ought to do it for a droid! But then word on the street suggested something else. These buckets of bolts were wholly owned by the customer issuing the bounty—someone's way of doing an end-run around the trade!

I'm still working on finding out who it was, but I know one thing—it wasn't such a hot deal. My guy at Czerka tells me the company was only too happy to unload the -24 units—an experiment gone wrong, he says. They're just autonomous enough to resent the blazes out of the existence of other units just like them. Maybe they're reducing each other to scrap metal even now.

Fine by me. One-off "hunter-killers" I can deal with. Now, I may not want to . . .

### KRAV'S HOT LIST

*They're hot—and they're worth a lot!*

Some biggies have come off the board, I'm afraid . . .



#### Marn Hierogryph

Bounties: Seven, totaling 24,000 credits  
Wanted for: Accomplice to murder, treason, racketeering, fraud

Still trying to find out if Zayne Carrick really did go down with the *Courageous*—if so, this little guy is all that's left of the Padawan Massacres. Massacres? Whatever. Last spotted on Ralltiir.



#### Kelven Garnatrope

Bounties: Four, totaling 43,000 credits  
Wanted for: Murder

Well, there's a picture, finally, but I'm not trusting the witnesses. I mean, come on! How can he be the "Corellian Strangler"? You'd hear him splashing around before he snuck up on you!

**SELECT to continue list...**

**SELECT to learn more...**

## The Secret Journal of Doctor Demagol

***Entry #6213: My Edessa!*** She is more than just one of my students. She is the *first* among them! *Edessa!*

Adasca suspected. His researcher, with his superior testing tools, discovered it far faster than I. I sealed his silence with blood. This knowledge is only for me. I must learn what I can from her.

She exists; the others must!

But first, I must get her off this ship. She cannot remain, and she must not leave with the Jedi. And she would never willingly go with Mand'alor. The only option is the boy Zayne, inept as he is. Such strange fortune brings him to me!

And then, the experiment, long paused, can continue. First her, and then the others. She must be trained in the use of her "Force skills." And she will need a weapon.



# THE TARIS HOLOFEED

## SPECIAL PROCLAMATION



### ATTENTION PEOPLE OF TARIS

I am Cassus Fett, comrade to Mand'alor and field marshal of the forces now laying siege to your planet.

This day, I release you from all allegiance to the Galactic Republic. The Mando'ade are your clan, now. This day, I release you from all obedience to the Chancellor. Mand'alor is your leader, now.

The Republic has failed Taris in battle. It has shown itself unworthy of the great sacrifices it has called upon you to make. But this is not a time for lamentations. For in this victory, we offer you the chance to share in the next one—and the next one, and the next one.

Those who wish to join the Mando'ade in their New Crusade for the galaxy are welcome. Helmet and armor will be yours—and the way of the warrior will be made known to you. In this victory, we have set you free—and on the path to glory!

Those who choose to remain on Taris providing for the clans shall live in peace. But beware! Those who feign loyalty and betray us shall die an honorless death!

This medium of the Old Order will now be deactivated.

TRANSMISSION INTERRUPTION

NO SIGNAL

NO SIGNAL

NO SIGNAL

\*\*\*\*\*



# THE ADMIRAL'S LIST

THE OFFICIAL COMMUNIQUE FROM THE REPUBLIC NAVY



## KARATH HOME SAFELY

*Embattled admiral reaches Coruscant*

Joyous celebrations spread quickly across Coruscant as word spread that Rear Admiral Saul Karath, veteran of the Serroco and Vanquo campaigns, had arrived safely.

The improbable escape from the devastation of Serroco took the admiral—along with his second, Commander Dallan Moewis, and three other crewmen—through occupied Mandalorian space. Their flight to safety included participation in the defense of the *Arkanian Legacy* against the Mandalorian raid that ultimately took the life of Lord Adasca (see related report).

Upon arrival at Admiralty Plaza, sources report the Admiral immediately submitted his resignation over the loss of Battle Group Serroco and flagship *Guragonsu*. The Admiral of the Fleet promptly refused to accept the resignation, instead convoking a private briefing for the Admiral and his companions. Afterward, the Admiral of the Fleet publicly commended Karath's performance.

The Admiralty has not yet announced a posting for Admiral Karath, although with the *Swiftsure* set to leave drydock at Corellia, speculation has focused on who is to command her. In brief remarks, the Admiral said he appreciated the outpouring of support but wanted to see that those in his ordeal had a chance to see their families—"in the name of those who did not make it home," he said.

## LORD ADASCA REMEMBERED

*Munitions, medicine supplier falls in surprise attack*



Republic defense officials sought quickly today to minimize supply concerns days after reports first surfaced that Arkoh, the eighth Lord Adasca, had been slain in a surprise attack on his research vessel by a Mandalorian raiding party. Rear Admiral Saul Karath confirmed the death of the young industrialist while on an expedition far from the protections of home.

"Lord Adasca met his end as he lived, in the search for knowledge," Admiral Karath said. He declined to speak further about the incident, about which little is known. Neither the location nor disposition of the *Arkanian Legacy* is known, and given the raid it must be assumed the Mandalorians are in close proximity.

"The supply of medical goods and processed materials from Adascorp continues uninterrupted," said defense official Catronus Steffens. However, doubt continues to circulate in the business world as to corporate control. The only remaining heir to the House of Adasca is herself unaccounted for since the devastation of Serroco—and earlier today, investor groups led by the Draay Trust filed a legal challenge in Adascopolis on Arkania for the right to bid for control of the company.

"Lord Adasca was a great and loyal corporate citizen of the Republic," Steffens said. "We expect to continue our robust relationship with his firm until our ultimate victory—and beyond."

(Knights Of The Old Republic #23)

### **The Secret Journal of Doctor Demagol**

**Entry #6235: A reversal.** The good fortune that brought me Edessa may well net out to zero. Zayne has insisted on bringing us all into Mandalorian space aboard a comical-looking gunship crewed by creatures whose brains could not be found with a thorough autopsy. At least the Trandoshan seems to know how to cook.

Worse, Squint has come along. Squint -- it does not appear to be his real name -- is a much stronger Jedi than Zayne. I have actually managed to use him to my ends as a sparring partner for Edessa, that I might see her abilities in full. She is a remarkable warrior in her own right, just as I would have expected. Continued exposure to Squint and Zayne could well bring her potential Jedi skills into flower.

But there is a new concern on that score. While Zayne is on some mission to find his Snivvian overlord, Squint has made romantic advances toward Edessa. I do not know current Jedi thinking about relationships, but Squint seems to make his own rules, in all things.

Edessa seems torn. Zayne is a child, but she seems to have some loyalty to him. Good. No distractions. These things are usually mistakes, anyway. I took a wife, once; Sibyl was a Zeltron researcher on the Project, and it seemed like the thing to do. More madness. Seeing true Zeltron theatricality made me long for the half-machine Iskalloni who raised me.

It is a wonder anyone is ever born.

(Knights Of The Old Republic #24)



SECRET! MOST SECRET! MOST SECRET! MOST SECRET! MOST

# GALACTIC REPUBLIC

## DEFENSE MINISTRY DAILY BRIEF #KD0092

**FROM:** Joint Operations Information Office, Defense Ministry

**TO:** Koa Delko, Defense Minister; Catronus Steffans, Defense Ministry Director for Public Information

### ARMY OPERATIONS

- Listening posts indicate Mandalorians have initiated new, massive ground operations in the Lower City of Taris. Additionally, an increase in planetary surface albedo detected by observers suggests a significant, sudden increase in the amount of material being released into the atmosphere.
- Approximately 2,000 casualties suffered overnight in clashes on Myrkr.
- Intel studies beginning on Neo-Crusader shock armor specimen obtained at Myrkr. Findings on capabilities and equipment sourcing expected later this week.

### NAVAL OPERATIONS

- Admiralty reports six more losses at frontier outposts, detailed in attachment 3C.
- Refit of *Swiftsure* at Corellia dockyards is now complete.
- Yesterday's clash in Omonoth system inconclusive. Neither we nor Mandalorians can salvage *Arkanian Legacy*.

**Policy recommendation:** *Concur with Commerce Ministry—continue news blackout on truth behind Arkoh Adasca's treachery.*

### PRODUCTION UPDATE

- Voluntary targets set by the new Office of Production Coordination on strategic materials are receiving little attention, the office reports. High prices paid in the Tapani Sector are continuing to divert needed materials and are driving up costs for the military. (see Legislative, below)
- Lhosan Industries freighters continue to arrive at frontier planets, distributing transmitters and miscellaneous dry goods.

**Policy recommendation:** *Public pronouncement honoring Lhosan CEO Jervo Thalien may inspire patriotism elsewhere in business community.*

### LEGISLATIVE UPDATE

- With no response from the Chancellor's special investigator, the inquiry into the so-called "Taris Affair" is losing steam in the Oversight committee.
- Senator Graw has repeated his call for the constructive use of export tariffs in limiting the Tapani Sector's draw on strategic supplies.

### JEDI UPDATE

- Jedi liaison now confirms one of the Knights on regular assignment on Serroco before the devastation has reported back, having escaped on one of the three military vessels that was able to make light speed. Reports indicate others were present, and one or more may have been part of the reported prisoner transfer to the Taris sector.
- On the policy front, Master Vrook Lamar gave a rare interview yesterday to the financial press restating the Jedi's non-interference stand in the Mandalorian War. But the leader of the nascent Revanchist movement is rumored to be arranging a meeting between several Jedi opinion-makers at an undisclosed location.

**Policy recommendation:** *Liaison recommends continued public expressions of understanding for Jedi neutrality. With no obvious supporters on the Council, backchannel communications to The Revanchist would be premature and would jeopardize the Republic's relations with the Order proper.*

**3963 bby**

**Interference**

*This story is set in early 3963 B.B.Y., a few weeks after the surprise attack by the Mandalorians on the Republic. It takes place between Volumes 4 and 5 of Dark Horse's Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic series*

**Attention Mandalorians!** Stay tuned to this frequency for an announcement of vital importance!

\* \* \*

**Attention Mandalorians!!** This is your friend from the Republic, *Captain Goodvalor* calling!

I'm busy shaking down my new warship, the *Serroco*, but my colleagues at the Admiralty have asked me to make an appeal to the forces fighting for Mandalore. I'm speaking on a frequency your helmet transceivers can pick up. It's a trick we learned from your fellow warriors who have already seen the light and crossed the lines to defend the Republic!

You've had a lucky little run -- though not a surprising one, following the sucker punches you've thrown. But the easy times are over, let me tell you!

In fact, I *will* tell you. Make sure you and all your Basic-speaking friends are listening for my next broadcast -- your lives may depend on it!

\* \* \*

*Su'cuy, warriors! Conquest of the south polar area of the planet is nearly complete. Attend to your rally masters for further instructions.*

*Some of you have reported hearing increased gabble on the Neo helmet's Z-band. Just ignore it.*

\* \* \*

**Attention Mandalorians!** Captain Goodvalor calling again, as promised.

You survived long enough to hear me -- good! Not all of you were so lucky, or so I hear. Your forces tried hard, they did -- but the Taris Resistance got away to fight another day. And fight they will. Because while they may not have been in the Republic long, they've got what it takes, where it counts.

*They do. We do. But what about you?*

That's right: We've been taking your measure in these first weeks since you barged into Republic territory -- just as you were taking ours with your little provocations before that. The difference is, we're able to do something about it.

It's all about the numbers, my friends. There are more of us than there are of you -- and we don't have to build shipyards and armories on the fly. We've already got them. How long do you really think it takes to refit a landspeeder factory to produce armored attack craft? And how many landspeeder factories do you imagine there are in the whole Galactic Republic, hmm?

You won't have to imagine for long. You'll be seeing what we can do up close and personal soon enough.

This is Goodvalor, signing off. Cue the slogan, Lieutenant.

**The Republic. Here today, here tomorrow.**

\* \* \*

*Ke'sush, warriors! This is Sornell, again, with the Taris signal post.*

*Yes, you do have to stay on the Z-band. The heavies are still coming in. You want to be standing in the wrong place when the bombs drop, it's fine by me.*

*Just stay focused.*

\* \* \*

**Attention Mandalorians!** Goodvalor, again. While you're waiting for the end to come -- and brother, is it on its way! -- I thought we'd have a talk about you. You know, the *Mando'ade* -- the "sons and daughters of Mandalore." That sounds nice, but I hate to break it to most of you: *You're adopted.*

They've told us many of you were once upstanding, peace-loving residents of worlds invaded by Mandalore and his thug, Cassus Fett. And that many of you were lured, by threat or trickery, into donning armor and joining his mad cause! But do you really know what that cause is? Do you know what you're fighting for? It's *ego*. Bruised ego is all it is -- not worth putting your skin (or scales, or whatever) on the line for.

Let old Goodvalor fill you in: A generation ago, in the Great Sith War, the Mandalorian clans were made to serve a single rogue Jedi, after he defeated your leader in combat. And to this day, nobody in metal shoulder pads has been able to get over it. So now, the current Mandalore -- the name your current scoundrel gave *himself*, how's that for cheek? -- is throwing your lives away in a galactic war. Just to repair -- what? His bruised ego, buddy! With *your* neck!

I know -- it's not the kind of thing they tell you about in armor class. Maybe there's a reason for that. Think about it: It only took one Jedi to humiliate you before -- and we've got a lot more where that came from! True, the Jedi Order remains *officially* neutral. But perhaps you've heard of The Revanchist -- a Jedi who's lobbying to change that even as I speak! That sound you hear is lightsabers igniting?

Things look good to you today, pillaging dress shops and fruit stands on rimworlds like Taris and Suurja. But the tide is turning. Which side will *you* be on? All you have to do is drop the helmet and walk away. Or better yet -- return to the service of the Republic that has given you so much!

Only the gloom of the grave awaits Mandalore. Don't join him. Join *us*!

**The Republic. No gloom. Just glory.**

\* \* \*

*Sornell here. We need to know what utreekov parked the Davaab fighter on top of the -- what is this? The Highport Banking Tower. We need the space for the new receiver platform.*

*Get up here and get your ship before we push it over the side.*

\* \* \*

**Attention Mandalorians!** This is Commander True, first officer to Captain Goodvalor.

The captain apologizes, but he is not going to be able to broadcast today. There were so many Mandalorians who crossed the lines and joined the Republic after his last message, he's just been too busy.

He sends his regards.

**The Republic. It sends its regards.**



\* \* \*

*Signal post. Okay, now, we've just seen it. I don't care what Jettiise nonsense is in the air, you can't go around switching off your transceivers!*

*We absolutely made a call -- what was it, Gorrage, ten seconds? Ten seconds after we shoved the fighter over the side of the building. There was plenty of time, if you were listening. You guys in the Lower City need to stay on top of things.*

*Oh, and -- ah, "we'll remember them, so they are eternal."*

\* \* \*

**Attention Mandalorians!** It's your captain speaking -- you know the one. I'm just sitting down to a delicious dish of Bilovi Tempari, here in my beautifully appointed climate-controlled ship's lounge. And that was when -- no, sweetheart, no more wine, thanks -- I got to thinking about *you*.

You, you valiant, daring creatures -- toughing it out there in the field for Old Rustface. Tell me, how's life?

Don't answer that -- I think I know! Those friends of yours I've told you about have described the vile conditions you're forced to endure. "Nomadic lifestyle," indeed. No style to *that* life, brothers and sisters -- slogging through one Outer Rim mudhole after another for weeks at a time. Tell the truth: How often do you get to clean that armor? I mean -- *inside*, where it counts? No wonder you like your camps spread out!

Sorry to go on about this, but, really, your ex-comrades-in-arms can't quit talking about how much better it is over here. Actually, a few of our recent arrivals will be over a little later. They're dropping by for drinks after the floor show. Come to think of it, I need to find out if they're bringing their dates -- we'll need to set up some more chairs by the pool.

**The Republic. Real beds. Running water.**

\* \* \*

*Su'cuy, Cassus Fett, and all honor to your family's dead. Sornell here, at the listening post.*

*Yes, we've all been hearing it.*

*No, I don't know what "Bivoli Tempari" is. We're asking around.*

\* \* \*

**Attention Mandalorians!** Let me tell you about my day -- it's been an exciting one. This is Captain Goodvalor, of course -- but today, I am an Okyaabi!

Today, I stood with the proud people of Okyaab 6 as they threw off the shackles of their Mandalorian slavers and rose to join the Republic. A small frontier system, to be sure -- but proof of the pettiness of Mandalore, as no peaceful farming community, no collection of artisans is too small to merit one of his cowardly attacks. But after less than a week under the illegitimate rule of the costume fetishist Mandalore and his cronies, the Okyaabi have retaken their world.

They're free, my Mandalorian friends -- free to participate in Republic commerce again and enjoy the prosperity so many of us have come to know. Free to go where they wish and live where they choose, without being driven ever onward in some futile quest for someone else's revenge. Free to be the kind of people *you* can be. If, that is, you choose to avoid the fate of the Mandalorian forces that once enslaved Okyaab. I'd put one of their survivors on the air to speak with you -- but blast it, we just haven't been able to find any...

**The Republic. Freedom now, freedom forever!**

\* \* \*

*This is Sornell, for the team at SoroSuub Landing, or whatever they call it. See if you can get that big viewscreen down without totally trashing the electronics. I'd like to have just one piece of equipment this trip I don't have to build myself, for a change.*

*And, no, I've never heard of a planet named Okyaab. Does it have to do with getting me the parts I asked for? Because I know none of you wants to waste my time.*

*And for you new recruits: "Cui ogir'olar" is Mando'a for "it's irrelevant." Or, in my clan, "You will bleed a lot if you ask again." So don't say you didn't know.*

\* \* \*

**Attention Mandalorians!** Goodvalor calling. They tell me you Mandalorians are a superstitious lot. (Like you couldn't tell from the weird stuff you carry around.

And so much of it! Haven't you people ever heard of apartments? Houses? Storage units?)

Anyway, this may interest you. We've learned from our many informants in your ranks that a batch of your forces in the Taris system is angling for Zongorlu next. What you may not know is that those weren't all military camps on Serroco that Mandalore so callously and criminally nuked. There were vacation camps for Zongorlu younglings -- nine camps, representing every major warrior-tribe on the planet!

Since then, we haven't seen people from Zongorlu out and about in the Republic much. They've become stay-at-home types -- and, well, they're more than a little touchy. Even their Senator just asked for a leave of absence -- and a heavy assault cannon.

I don't think I'd come to Zongorlu if I were you.

**The Republic. Just looking out for you.**

\* \* \*

*Sornell here. Everybody forming up in the camp up here, the signal station is not the place to bring your questions about alien biology. If you really want to know what a Zongorlu looks like, you can wait until we get there.*

*I don't care if you just joined us. Next guy who bothers me gets beaten to death.*

\* \* \*

Captain Goodvalor will return shortly. In the meantime, this Republic weather report for Zongorlu:

Hurricane-force winds across much of the planet, with magnetic storms throughout the ionosphere. Searing heat at the surface, with intermittent pyroclastic flows from some of the larger volcanic ranges. Atmospheric sulfur content remains high, with acidic rains in the polar regions.

Essentially, for Zongorlu, a temperate day.

\* \* \*

*We'll need another couple of days on the mobile signal station, Cassus. We were able to scrounge most of the equipment from the shops here on Taris, but we're*

*pretty sure on Zongorlu we'll need some kind of heavy-duty shielding for the transmitter. We're forging something now. I'll shout when we're ready.*

*No, we're still getting the broadcasts -- and yeah, they're a problem. Not for the real Mando'ade -- "kaysh mirsh'kyramud" is all you hear from them. They couldn't care less. But I don't know about some of these guys that put on a Neo-Crusader helmet five minutes ago to join the fun.*

*They're always asking why we don't jam the Republic broadcasts, like we did when we were landing. I tell them that a siege is one thing -- then, an attack on an enemy comm system is like an attack on an enemy army -- but an occupation is something else. Jamming serves no purpose now. We're wrapping up anybody the Republic might want to talk to here -- and as for ourselves, no warrior worth the name ought to pay it any mind. That's what they ought to do, but...*

*... well, let me tell you. My cousin's a rally master running a bunch of these newbies as a demo team, clearing out the Undercity. Yesterday they were supposed to be minding the detonators when another one of these stupid broadcasts came on, and some mindless di'kut got preoccupied and brought a city block down on top of everyone, my cousin and all.*

*Thanks -- but no. Actually, we never thought that much of him.*

\* \* \*

**Attention Mandalorians!** Captain Goodvalor here -- pardon me for being out of breath. I was just taking another walk around the decks of the *Serroco*, and I'm winded. I haven't had that much exercise since training at the Academy.

I haven't spoken much about my fine ship, have I? For shame -- I'm such a terrible host. Well, some of you may have seen some of our larger vessels, valiantly defending and delaying your forces at places with names such as Vanquo, Tarnith, and -- yes -- *Serroco*. Well, they'd all fit nicely into the landing bay of this beauty. With room to spare!

Only we don't spare much room, because we need it. Yes, every bit of space (not devoted to the many entertainments I've mentioned previously) is currently committed to housing troops for landing; their munitions; and our own more-than-healthy complement of precision guided missiles. Those Republic naval designers don't skimp on anything! And if you Mandies think you know armor, you should take a look at our shielding! Why, I'll bet there were a few less asteroids in the Deep Core once they got done with this miracle!



And this fleet! I know this is audio, but let me paint the picture for you. Right now, I'm looking out my window at a sky so thick with ships, you could walk from here to the next system. Hammerhead cruisers! *Conductor*-class transports! Military droid carriers! I've never seen so many in one place. It's like an old Academy reunion -- only it's no party. No, everyone here has a very important mission. A very important, very *secret* mission.

So many ships! So many troops! I'm not sure if Zongorlu has nearly enough space for all of us.

Oops! I gave something away, there, didn't I?

**The Republic. Just imagine what we can do.**

\* \* \*

*Sornell here. Everybody on this duty, hurry up and get this junk loaded. The planet's not going to invade itself.*

\* \* \*

***Attention, all Republic civilian vessels in the Zongorlu system!*** This is Captain Goodvalor of the *Serroco*, advising you to depart the area.

It isn't that we cannot guarantee your safety against the Mandalorians -- we're here to protect the entire system, after all. But with so many warships here, now, traffic in the area is a bit congested.

Come back next week -- once we get all the armored bodies carted away, Zongorlu should be open for business again.

\* \* \*

*This is Sornell, aboard Shaadlar troopship Nehutyc. Inform Cassus Fett that we're well underway.*

*No word from up ahead on Zongorlu yet. We haven't been able to confirm much of anything -- we can't even find anyone who's ever seen a ship like this "Serroco," not even any of the Republic guys who came over. But whatever's there, we're ready for it.*

\* \* \*

**Attention Mandalorians!** Captain Goodvalor, and... pardon my yawn. Yes, I'm up late. Always hard to sleep the night before the battle, isn't it? It's night where we are, on guard, orbiting above the largest citadel on Zongorlu. But for our visitors soon to arrive, the night will never end. And that's why I wanted to speak to you: not as enemy captain to enemy footsoldier, but as one sentient being to another.

There's still time to change your minds, to change your paths. To take control of your transport ships -- and your lives, and in so doing, save them.

Whatever strategic importance you may have been told Zongorlu has in some wider scheme of Mandalore's -- consider the cost. I've told you what's waiting for you, here. That's all I can do.

No snappy slogan tonight. This is Captain Goodvalor, signing off.

\* \* \*

*This is it -- Zongorlu, dead ahead. Will call when the signal station is in place. Happy hunting.*

Oya!

\* \* \*

*This is Koblus Sornell on Zongorlu. Give me Cassus.*

*Well, have him contact me, right away.*

*This is ... strange.*

\* \* \*

*Cassus, the signal post is operational. Your marshal's still in the field, but I can give you the view from here.*

*First, the planet. Those reports we were getting were full of gas. The planet's decent enough -- good weather, no problem getting down at all. And the shock troops were a waste. The Zongorlu are a plant species. They're sentient, all right, but they're big and lumpy and they move about a meter a day. They kind of blinked when we landed. I don't think they had camps of younglings on Serroco -- unless they had them out in the garden somewhere!*

*And the fleet amounted to even less. There were a couple of abandoned ships floating around in orbit -- Mandalore the Indomitable might have seen them when he went past a generation ago, from the looks of them.*

*But the most dini'la, the most insane, the most crazy thing is right where I'm at. I'm talking to you from a transmission station, all right -- but it's not the one we brought. From the logs, as best as I can tell -- this was where that guy was talking to us from. Captain Goodhaven, or whatever his name is!*

*They've got a directional transmitter here, which we're guessing they were using to target points on the Outer Rim. All the time this so-called "Captain" was talking about his big ship, he's been sitting in a little room you couldn't fit a basilisk in, gnawing on dried dreeka fish and running his mouth!*

*No, he's not here -- it looks like he dropped everything when we came out of hyperspace. The trackers have found marks where a little ship took off.*

*Like I said, strange. But a good lesson for the new guys. This is the way a Mandalorian jams a broadcast -- we take out the source!*

*Sornell out.*

*\* \* \**

*Sornell, to the camp -- Cassus tells us we need to hold station for a week or so. This operation was supposed to take a lot longer.*

*Haili cetare! Have a drink, enjoy the weather.*

*\* \* \**

*Sornell, to the camp. Look, Cassus will call us when it's our turn to move again. He's got some other things going on.*

*And if you've got to entertain yourselves, don't set fire to the Zongorlu. It hasn't rained all week. The whole camp could go up.*

*\* \* \**

*Warriors, there's no use being on the Z-band at all. There's no bombing traffic to worry about, and that Republic fraud won't be there, either.*

*Every day can't be a battle -- I think someone said that once. Find something to do, or I'll find something for you to do.*

\* \* \*

*Status report from Zongorlu. It's quiet, here.*

*Very quiet.*

*I can't believe we're actually missing that stupid thing.*

\* \* \*

**Attention Mandalorians!** Stay tuned to this frequency for an announcement of vital importance!

\* \* \*

Haar'chak! Haar'chak! Haar'chak!

*I take it back.*

\* \* \*

**Attention Mandalorians!** This is Captain Goodvalor speaking!

Yes, as you've seen, our forces were called away unexpectedly from Zongorlu -- and I, myself, was summoned to Coruscant for an important session with the Admiralty and representatives of the Senate! And as part of our long-standing commitment to the environment, my forces made sure to leave Zongorlu looking even more peaceful than it did when we arrived. We hope you'll do the same.

Now, I'm signaling to you from a position further in Republic space with a message that we hope you'll find of interest. It is, in fact, the very reason I was recalled -- as the Republic's representative to the Mandalorians these last weeks, I'm sure you'll recognize my offer as an official one.

And it is an offer. They say that Mandalorians deal with things in a Mandalorian way. Well, the same is true of the Republic. And what is the Republic at heart, if not first and foremost, a vehicle for the enrichment of all peoples? There isn't any reason at all why the forces of Mandalore can't have a seat at the table like anyone else.

And so the offer is this: The Republic would welcome a cessation of hostilities with the *Mando'ade*. In return, the Senate would be willing to commit a share of

all taxation from Republic planets and hyperspace lanes currently under Mandalorian occupation to go to the occupiers. That's right: the spoils of war, to stop the war.

It is a fair price, and one that should more than satisfy all your requirements. With your victories in these weeks, your honor has been restored. The galaxy knows it. The Jedi did nothing to stop you; they know it. And you will have the prize -- part of the wealth of these stars, without having to continue to enforce your will on them. You'll be free to explore your options elsewhere, in directions away from the Republic -- and you'll be better funded to be able to do it.

This is a one-time offer, made only on this channel and directed to the Mandalorian representative on Zongorlu for delivery to his or her superiors. It will not be repeated or acknowledged in the future; if rejected, it will not be part of any official history. We'll return to as it was, with the Republic readying to run you out -- and with Captain Goodvalor's words preparing the way. Me, talking to you -- every day, on every frequency we can find to reach you, until one of us capitulates.

The choice is yours. Consider it well. We await your response.

**The Republic. Square deals for one and all.**

\* \* \*

*Yes, Cassus, I responded already. I used the transmitter here on Zongorlu.*

*I know I should have waited. Who is Koblus Sornell, anyway? Just a warrior. A signals expert, but a warrior. A Mandalorian warrior...*

*... and as a Mandalorian warrior, their "choice" was really no choice at all. I spoke for all of us: Their "bargain" was ridiculous.*

*Think about it: They could have a glorious battle, a true measure of what we're worth. That's a bargain. Instead, they're trying to choose -- a bribe? To buy peace like a peasant at a shop? All it costs is whatever guts they ever had.*

*And they thought we might agree to it! Whatever gave them that idea?*

*Just like with this "Captain Goodvalor" business. Pretending to be the victor of great battles -- that's insulting enough all on its own. But big talk about what*

*they can do, how big their forces are? Lies about people leaving our side? Did they really think any true Mandalorian would listen?*

*Do they really fear us so little?*

*They'll find out. Whatever kind of enemies the Republic is used to, they'll find out we're something different.*

*I don't understand them. And I don't think they understand us.*

## **The Secret Journal of Doctor Demagol**

**Entry #6272. In transit, again.** We are on another silly mercy mission. Edessa loves them, so -- and I want her trust. But it is frustrating. So much time has been lost. I still have no idea what became of her in the years we were apart.

I am having no luck finding her a weapon. The fool Ithorians aboard this ship have every weapon in the galaxy in their junk piles, but no lightsabers. There must be rules for their distribution, or something.

I have learned more about Zayne Carrick and his experiences with the Jedi. If true, it is most interesting. For such a revered body, the Jedi order may be as fraught with intrigue as the Mandalorians are.

It is right that this time, my discovery is my own. I will decide who will profit from Edessa and her kind later. The science is what is important.

(Knights Of The Old Republic #25-30)

## **The Secret Journal of Doctor Demagol**

**Entry #6305: Progress.** I have a lightsaber. The Ithorians stole a nice-looking specimen from the Jedi storehouse, and I have taken it from them.

The Jedi are truly a superstitious lot. The weapon is sealed in a special resin and labeled as some kind of evil artifact, dangerous to those using the Force. The Jedi do not seem to understand their own powers.

They sound like Pulsipher -- whom Zayne improbably met while away on Jebble. The fate of my would-be "aide" was pleasing to hear. It would have been interesting to see -- from a scientific perspective, of course.

(Knights Of The Old Republic #31-35)

### **The Secret Journal of Doctor Demagol**

**Entry #6358: Ruination avoided.** These close calls are wearing on me. It was bad enough that Edessa insisted we accompany Zayne to the heart of the Republic, on a crazed attempt to clear his name. But this last encounter with the Republic Navy was nearly my end. If it had not been for the lunatic architecture of the Ithorians' ship and what was going on outside, I would have been exposed. Fortunately, there were so many places to hide that the first face I saw was the one I *wanted* to see -- Edessa's, after the danger was past.

We will be leaving Coruscant again, soon, on another vessel. The droid will carry me to it in yet another shipping container, so as not to alarm the authorities. It is well that Edessa has accepted my reasons for not revealing my face. Until she trusts me enough to tell me everything that happened to her in the intervening years, I cannot take the risk.

But she has decided of her own volition to journey onwards with me. I dare to hope.

(Knights Of The Old Republic #36-37)

### **The Secret Journal of Doctor Demagol**

**Entry #6378: Success, delayed.** There is nothing like seeing an experiment come to fruition. Today, on Metellos 3, I saw it -- if nearly twenty years late. Edessa has the abilities I predicted. I saw with my own eyes.

Now, I need Zayne to teach her everything he knows, however little that may be. Squint -- he now calls himself Malak, I am told -- would have been a better teacher, but I fear his presence. He would steal Edessa from me. And if he knew I was Demagol, his so-called "tormentor"? He would take more, still.

I am impatient for Zayne to begin her education. In the meantime, I must continue to work at freeing this lightsaber for use. The Jedi who encased it meant business.

(Knights Of The Old Republic #38-42)

### **The Secret Journal of Doctor Demagol**

**Entry #6429: Disaster, again.** I am not moved to emotion as other beings are -- and certainly not as other Zeltrons are. Sibyl, my departed wife, could erupt into fury or tears at a hair falling on the floor. I live life in a middle groove. But I admit, returning this evening from Gantra Lea with the chemicals needed to free the lightsaber from its prison, I was in what may be called high spirits. Perhaps that is why, when I saw Malak in the camp, trying to steal Edessa away from me, I erupted. It would have thrilled Sibyl -- the emotional display she always wanted to see from me.

What followed was nearly a calamity. Malak unleashed his fury, unrestrained. It is fortunate that Zayne happened by as he did. So far, nearly to be found out!

The Snivvian says he can find me more of the chemicals I spilled, although he asks for something called a "mark-up." He is a strange little person.

(Knights Of The Old Republic #43-44)

### **The Secret Journal of Doctor Demagol**

**Entry #6447: Patience has paid off.** Edessa has told me what became of her and her other friends from Osadia. It is an amazing story. Surprising, too: in some ways, our childhoods were similar. Of course, we have come to much different ends.

The boy has a plan to find her fellow students. The odds against success seem overwhelming, but Zayne has a strange relationship with fate.



Even if he fails, I at least know where to look.

(Knights Of The Old Republic #45-46)

### **The Secret Journal of Doctor Demagol**

**Entry #6469: *They live. They all live.*** My failure, long ago, is erased. Zayne has found it out. Many of the Project's youthful test subjects live, just like Edessa -- and now, fully grown, they will be as important to me as she has become. Together, we will reshape the galaxy -- and ready it for even greater discoveries.

And fortune begets fortune. Edessa has decided to leave the others, remaining only with me. It was even at her suggestion, though I seem to be having an easier time convincing people of things lately. It is strange, but since freeing the lightsaber from the resin, it seems my persuasive abilities have improved.

It is probably nothing.

Not long now.

(Knights Of The Old Republic #47)

### **The Secret Journal of Doctor Demagol**

**Entry #6477: *The last step.*** This is final entry I will record in this accursed armor. Edessa and I have left Wor Tandell for Osadia. For good or ill, I will reveal myself as the head of the Project as soon as we are in hyperspace. We will go together, and we will find her fellow Project members.

I will not tell her of my intervening years, living as Demagol, carver of flesh. It will upset the experiment.

I wonder if she will be glad to see me.

(Knights Of The Old Republic #48-49)

### **The Secret Journal of Doctor Demagol**

**Final entry:** This is Rohlan Dyre, rightful owner of this helmet.

I don't know what to do with this file. Listening to it just now, I was tempted to melt the whole suit of armor down. If my ancestors had known that Mandalorians in my day could be so full of deceit, they'd have killed their neighbors before they could breed.

I first saw Demagol when I was a young warrior -- and I knew then he was no fit with the Mando'ade. I was glad I was able to catch up with him, and claim what was mine. I only wish I'd dealt with him sooner. A lot of misery would have been spared. He was wrong about Jedi artifacts -- and he was wrong about Jedi.

And was he ever wrong about Mandalorians.

Demagol begins with one correct point -- a fight with a Jedi isn't a fair fight. Special powers are a crutch that a real warrior doesn't want or need; and stars help us when someone gets those powers that shouldn't. Like that Malak. I can tell he's going to be a piece of work. But then Demagol thinks our warriors should take the crutch for themselves. That's dead wrong.

I know what real Mandalorians think. Sure, we didn't like to see the clans being beaten by Jedi -- but we weren't humiliated, and we're not jealous. We're just annoyed at the people who lost. They bring a bigger gun? You fight harder. They bring the Force? *You fight harder!*

If Mandalore the Indomitable had wanted to defeat Ulic Qel-Droma -- *he should have been more indomitable!*

That's enough. Tomorrow, I take Carrick and his friend on a short trip, to begin to undo some of the damage that monster did. After that, it's back to business. There's still a war out there -- and I've still got questions.

I'm tired of lying around.

(Knights Of The Old Republic #50)

**The Sith Lords Chronicles**

## **Part IX: Darth Revan Rising**

Time frame: 3,963 B.B.Y.

Period name: Knights of the Old Republic

It is a period of turmoil in the Galaxy. The fierce Mandalorian warrior race begins the MANDALORIAN WAR by viciously and simultaneously attacking three quadrants of Republic space. As the battle rages on, Jedi Master REVAN moves surreptitiously between unknown sectors, scouting for potential strongholds to withstand the attacks. He soon discovers the shadowy Malachor V, a planet listed by Mandalorian scholars as "forbidden" to step foot on. The reason for this soon becomes clear as Revan is almost devoured by primal Sith forces on the world's surface. Revan's will allows him to feed on (and not be consumed by) the power of the dark side. Revan develops an evil but brilliant plan: Using the dark power of Malachor V, he will seduce an army of Jedi, completely loyal to him alone. He will then turn the planet's evil power against the Mandalorian army in battle, luring them to his stronghold and destroying them completely. A stronghold is immediately constructed.

Meanwhile on Dantooine, the small Jedi academy overseen by Master Vodo-Siosk Baas is shocked to learn that a lone Jedi Padawan has disobeyed a direct order from Jedi Master ATRIS, a prominent Jedi on the Council. This single student has left behind the relative safety of the training grounds to fight alongside the Jedi loyal to Master Revan. But this young one, like the other Jedi brethren, is unaware of the tremendous dark side power wielded by Revan and the terrible secrets of Malachor V. Revan's power continues to grow, and he secretly strengthens his stronghold, hiding it even from his apprentice, DARTH MALAK. Soon, the evil force infecting the planet became the FORGE for Darth Revan's shock troops; the feared SITH ASSASSINS - fallen Jedi, tempted and cajoled by the evil of Malachor V, and under Revan's evil command. Soon, a shadow academy to the one on Korriban is constructed; and an evil enclave mirroring the Jedi academy on Dantooine is complete.

**3,962 bby**

### **Onderon Cutoff**

Late in the Mandalorian wars, the Old Republic fought to retake the planet Onderon and its moon, Duxon, from the Mandalorian invaders. Under the command of the Jedi Revan (before he turned to the dark side), Old Republic troops and their Jedi allies invaded Onderon and Duxon.

Eventually, after intense fighting, the Old Republic forces dislodged the Mandalorians.

The planet Onderon was one of many fighting retreats of the fractured Mandalorian forces. In the ruins of a small city plaza, a reduced, veteran Mandalorian squad must fight its way through a small, inexperienced Old Republic squad with strong Jedi Knights, which has moved to cut off the Mandalorians' escape route. Not content to simply flee, the Mandalorians intend to take out as many troops and Jedi as they can along the way.

### **Part X: Proving Grounds**

Time frame: 3,961 - 3,956 B.B.Y.

Period name: Knights of the Old Republic

It is a period of tumult and astuteness for the galaxy's most powerful entities, as the Mandalorian conflict culminates. The Jedi, fighting alongside the Republic and their finest tactical minds, such as Admiral SAUL KARATH aboard his flagship Leviathan, begin to force the fierce Mandalorians back into a retreat. The rout of the Mandalorians reaches a crescendo above the skies of Malachor V.

Unbeknownst to the Jedi Order, DARTH REVAN has discovered numerous Sith artifacts and holocrons, all stored in great tomb-like cities buried beneath Malachor V's surface. As Revan plundered these tombs and relics, he fell deeper into the Dark Side. He learned of the location and the true nature of Korriban, he learned of the location of other Sith artifacts, and he learned how those strong in the light side of the Force could be seduced and made to see the strength inherent in the Sith teachings.

Revan knew he had discovered more than a staging area for the Mandalorian War - he had discovered an ancient, planet-sized Sith storehouse of knowledge.

He had discovered a world that held one purpose - to teach and train others in the ways of the Sith. He had discovered a weapon that he could use against the Mandalorians, and a weapon by which he could convert more Jedi to his cause. This process of "turning" Jedi into SITH ASSASSINS continued even as the Jedi Council hailed Revan as a hero, as he led the Republic forces to victory over the Mandalorians in the skies above Malachor V, and forces them to surrender. Revan is able to draw upon the dark side energies of the planet below and use it during the battle, destroying the Mandalore and ending the Mandalorian threat. Simultaneously, more and more Jedi, unable to ignore the power emanating from the planet below, become corrupted by its influence.

A lone Jedi Knight, who had journeyed earlier to fight alongside Revan, forsakes him after the surrender of the Mandalorians - and the apparent loss of the Knight's connection to the Force during the battle - and journeys back to the Old Republic, determined not to fight any longer. The Knight is exiled by the Jedi Order, and the Knight's lightsaber is removed. Meanwhile, Darth Revan and his apprentice, DARTH MALAK, return from the Mandalorian War with a new fleet, comprising many previously loyal Republic soldiers and commanders, and a systematic and lethal attack begins. In tandem with the attacks of his fleet, Revan orders his SITH ASSASSINS to ratchet up the frequency and brutality of their swift attack strikes. The period of history known as the Old Republic Insurrection begins.

In disarray, the Jedi Council quickly gathers a small band of Jedi warriors together under the command of Jedi BASTILA SHAN with an imperative and almost suicidal mission; to capture Darth Revan, demoralize his troops, and strangle the insurrection. Setting a trap against a small Republic fleet, a small Jedi strike force boards Revan's ship, battling the Dark Lord into submission. Rather than helping his Master, DARTH MALAK lets the Jedi drag Revan from the throne after attempting a mind-wipe which was only partially successful. Returning to the Council with a comatose Revan, Jedi Masters healed Revan's mind, and implanted a loyal Republic personality.

**3,957 bby**

### **Payback**

The end of the Mandalorian Wars shattered the Mandalorian movement and culture. The remaining Mandalorians scattered throughout the galaxy, surviving only as small groups left to fend for themselves. Some became mercenaries or retreated to remote worlds, while others abandoned the cause altogether. However, they never forgot who was responsible for their destruction: the Jedi Revan and his Republic allies.

When their old foe returns as Darth Revan at the head of the new Sith Empire, their enemy's new names matter little to the Mandalorians. Though largely powerless to stop or influence the Sith on a large scale, individual groups take great enjoyment in ambushing and destroying isolated elements of the Sith. After the Sith Empire invades Taris, a small group of Mandalorian mercenaries trapped on the planet take it upon themselves to exact a little payback from a newly established Sith outpost.

The Mandalorians use the element of surprise, bursting into the outpost through multiple entrances. However, the Sith are hardly defenseless, having installed an interior minefield in case Taris resistance forces, Republic raiders, or others tried to attack their installation.

### **Peril In The Kailion Caves**

Disoriented, Karii dragged himself up to his knees from the dank floor of the cave and coughed dust from his lungs. *Cave-in?* he wondered.

The rest of the team were already up and surveying their surroundings, lit only dimly by the blades of their lightsabers. He glanced back at the passage they had just come through, now a pile of impenetrable rock.

"That rockslide wasn't coincidence," Master Dajjun said.

Karii turned toward his master. "A trap, then?"

"A trap indeed."

Master Dajjun helped Karii to his feet. Glancing away, he said, "4-B4, check the data droid. Make sure we haven't been completely duped."

4-B4 hustled over to the blocky data droid -- their recently, and *forcibly*, acquired prize -- then linked to it and went to work verifying its records. The droid was supposed to contain proof that the Sheyasti Trade Syndicate was in fact smuggling supplies for the Separatists. But if the proof had been faked --

Suddenly, Master Dajjun leaped into action, followed only a split second later by the other Jedi. They converged on a shape lunging out of the blackened recesses of the cave. An *enormous* shape. In the darkness, Karii couldn't make out much more than tentacles flailing at Master Dajjun. Only now, as the Jedi drove the creature away, could Karii finally sense its pain and anger through the Force. The others had felt it so quickly! He still had much to learn.

4-B4 detached from the data droid and spoke in its oddly musical voice. "The information in the droid appears to be complete and unaltered."

"Excellent," Master Dajjun replied, spinning his twin sabers in his habitual manner. "Then all we need to do is get it out of these caves in one piece."

He stalked off into the black. "Be wary. There are more of those creatures out there," Master Dajjun warned. "Many more."

### **Czerka 431**

During the Jedi Civil War, the far-reaching Czerka Corporation supplied material to the Sith Empire. However, that didn't stop them from operating facilities throughout the Republic as well. Even though the corporation was morally ambiguous, employees occasionally failed to toe the company line.

Czerka 431 was one of the corporation's hidden research facilities on the fringes of known space. Unlike most Czerka facilities, the Sith military took direct control to assess the suitability of its work for the war effort and possible manufacture by the Star Forge.

Joni Ree, a company scientist in charge of experimenting with juggernaut war droids, decided that she'd had enough of her new bosses. She arranged for the Republic to "discover" Czerka 431's location and coordinated their arrival with her escape attempt. The Sith, of course, were aware of her dislike of them, and they kept her locked up while she continued to work with the droids. They also

assigned a formidable heavy assault droid to defend the facility and further discourage the scientist.

Joni plans to use the juggernauts to blast her way out as the Republic forces enter the facility. The Republic rescue team hopes to deny the Sith a new weapon by helping her escape. The Sith, on the other hand, want very much to keep Joni working for them. However, they're under orders not to kill her under any circumstances, which hinders their efforts to prevent her escape.

### **Permanent Demotion**

Fallout continues from the incident at Czerka 431 the previous scenario. After the Republic attack, both the Czerka Corporation and the Sith Empire held the facility's chief administrator responsible for 431's discovery by the Republic. The accusation was strongly supported by the administrator's willing departure with the escaping Republic forces. Republic command soon had the administrator helping them access secure data files at the ruins of Czerka Lab AB-343, which had been overrun by Republic forces early in the war.

Knowing that this could expose the depth of Czerka's agreement with the Sith Empire, neither the corporation nor the Sith could stand for this development. They determined that a Sith assassin had the best chance to infiltrate the facility and eliminate the administrator. Coincidentally, the ultrasecret and independent Genoharadan came to the same conclusion.

They determined that it would best serve their political goals if the agreement between Czerka and the Sith Empire remained unknown to the Republic. They, too, sent an assassin to eliminate the administrator.

Meanwhile, at AB-343, the former administrator and a few Republic guards work to access the damaged lab's computer system. They have just realized that they are not alone.

## **Part XI: Knights of the Old Republic**

Time frame: 3,956 B.B.Y.

Period name: Knights of the Old Republic

The Republic verges on collapse. DARTH MALAK, last surviving apprentice of Dark Lord Revan, has unleashed an invincible Sith armada upon an unsuspecting galaxy. Crushing all resistance, Malak's war of conquest has left the Jedi Order scattered and vulnerable as countless Knights fall in battle and many more



swear allegiance to their new Sith Master. In the skies above the Outer Rim world of Taris, a Jedi battle fleet engages the forces of Darth Malak in a desperate effort to halt the Sith's galactic domination. During the battle, one of the crippled space craft jettisons Jedi BASTILA SHAN, after fighting valiantly against a boarding party including Malak's new apprentice, DARTH BANDON. Her escape pod is located in the Undercity of Taris by a human suffering from amnesia, Mandalorian Wars hero CARTH ONASI, a Twi'Lek scoundrel and native of Taris, MISSION VAO, and her Wookiee companion, ZAALBAR. Seeking refuge, the legendary smuggling ship EBON HAWK is appropriated from Taris underworld boss Davik Kang, and piloted to the Jedi Enclave of DANTOOINE. Soon afterwards, the human amnesiac begins to exhibit impressive use of the Force, and is trained by Jedi Master ZHAR LESTIN.

After a number of dangerous and foolhardy missions throughout the galaxy in search of cartographical tools known as Star Maps, the members of this small alliance are detected and detained on the gigantic Interdictor-class Star Cruiser Flagship LEVIATHAN under the command of Admiral SAUL KARATH. Karath was a pivotal Republic figure only five years previously, winning victories over the Mandalorians, but recently declared the Republic not worthy of his support. After an impressive display of guile, the alliance was released from the ship's brig, and attempted a full-scale assault of the bridge, fatally wounding Karath. During the escape, however, Bastila and the amnesiac Jedi Knight are waylaid by the appearance of DARTH MALAK, who reveals that the Knight is in fact DARTH REVAN, his old Master. Escaping to the UNKNOWN WORLD of the Rakata, Bastila turns on Revan, and after a climactic battle, Revan learns of Malak's plan to harness a nearby sun using an ancient Rakata space station known as the STAR FORGE, and use this energy to increase production of his Sith forces. Revan vows to slay his ex-apprentice before Malak's power becomes too great.

## **Part XII: The Feeding of Malachor V**

Time frame: 3,955 - 3,953 B.B.Y.

Period name: Knights of the Old Republic 2: The Sith Lords

It is a period of uncertainty across the galaxy. After a long and vicious battle in the deepest area of the STAR FORGE, Dark Lord of the Sith DARTH REVAN

succeeds in destroying his ex-apprentice DARTH MALAK. After recovering from the duel, Revan seeks out the secret dark outposts he established during the Mandalorian War. Journeying to the Outer Rim in the EBON HAWK, Revan is focused with a single purpose: locating the source of the dark power on MALACHOR V. Those awaiting Revan's arrival, including members of the Sith and the Jedi, are shocked when he fails to return from this pilgrimage. It is unknown whether Revan destroyed or resurrected the primal Sith forces on this forbidden planetoid.

The turmoil of the previous decade has had a detrimental effect on the surviving members of the Jedi Order. Disillusionment and despair persists in the wake of the war both throughout the Old Republic, and within the Jedi Order itself. Furthering exacerbating the malaise is the corruption of Darth Revan and Darth Malak, and the untold harm their actions had brought to the Republic. These three reasons were cited by many the impetus for the disbanding of the Jedi. While the Jedi mull over their troubles, the battle-hardened Mandalorian hero CANDEROUS ORDO returns to the homeworld of DXUN, seeking to rebuild his clan, and find a new purpose in the galaxy. Through prowess and cunning, he rises to eventually become Mandalore.

JEDI MASTER KREIA, Revan's old mentor, is still haunted by guilt, wondering whether it was her teaching that resulted in Revan's fall to the dark side, and begins to search for him. Sensing his last location, she travels to Malachor V, but is unable to shield her emotions, and is completely consumed by the dark side of the Force. She is lost to the Jedi, spending the next several years on Malachor V, learning its secrets, and eventually becoming The master of the Sith academy there. Guided by Kreia's influence, Sith assassins once again begin to emerge silently from Malachor V and strike at isolated Jedi across the Republic, capturing some Jedi to turn to the dark side, and slaying those that resist. Taken to the dark side world of Malachor V to be fed to the planet's dark energies, these Jedi husks create even more assassins and DARK JEDI, feeding the planet's hunger.

### **Part XIII: Ascension of the Sith**

Time frame: 3,953 - 3,951 B.B.Y.

Period name: Knights of the Old Republic 2: The Sith Lords

It is the beginning of the Jedi's decline throughout the Galaxy. Individual Jedi begin to leave the Jedi Order, and the Jedi Watchmen of many systems, disenchanted with the endless, pointless struggles, step down and exile themselves in unknown quadrants of the galaxy, echoing the disillusionment of Jedi Master JOLEE BINDO. These are referred to by scribes of the time as the LOST JEDI. With their numbers already thinned by the war with DARTH MALAK, the Jedi Order is reduced to less than one hundred surviving Jedi Knights. As the numbers of Jedi continue to dwindle, the remaining practitioners of the light side of the Force believe the Lost Jedi to have forsaken the Order, but in fact, many of them are victims of Sith Assassins, or are being captured and imprisoned on the dark side world of MALACHOR V, waiting to be converted to the dark side of the Force. Under the watchful gaze of a corrupted Jedi KREIA, many of these Jedi die, but some are converted.

Coming to the realization that they are being targeted by a hidden and insidious adversary, the Jedi Order scatter, going to ground in an attempt to draw out the attackers. To all intents and purposes, the Jedi Order disbands, and renounces the Old Republic. One of the Order, JEDI MASTER ATRIS, gives in to her frustration and the collapse of the Jedi Order, and begins to delve into Sith holocrons to attempt to determine the nature of the threat facing the Jedi. Attempting to summon the remaining Jedi she has kept contact with, Atris attempts to call a Jedi Conclave under the strict agreement of secrecy on a Midrim world. She struggles to comprehend her actions as the Conclave is interrupted when every single Jedi attending vanishes without a trace. It is later discovered that all of them were savagely culled by Dark Side Sith Assassins under the command of DARTH NIHILUS. Unknown to the rest of the Jedi, Atris secretly leaked knowledge of the Jedi attending the Conclave in the hopes that the enemy would reveal themselves. However, the results were worse than Atris could have possibly imagined.

# THE REFORMATION OF REVAN

c. 3951 B.B.Y.

Author: Deesra Luur Jada

*It has been five long years since the destruction of the Jedi enclave on Dantooine, and only now am I able to return. It grieves me to see what remains of the enclave. Ruins and rubble. What wasn't leveled by Darth Malak has been plundered by the now vanquished Sith occupiers and the less reputable of the surviving natives. Although I trust that my predecessor, Master Dorak, the former official chronicler of the enclave, would have looked upon these remains without a pained expression, I wonder if it is not for the best that he did not live to see this. It was no secret how much he considered the enclave a part of himself.*

*When I became a Jedi historian, I expected my days would be filled with the study of ancient mediations and battles, not as a chronicler of current events or an archaeologist of recent history. Increasingly, I feel like nothing more than a necrologist, dispatching weekly obituaries to the archives on Ossus. I remain conscientious of my work, for all the good it has done. Just today, I found myself correcting a young Padawan and some locals who were speaking of "the day the Sith Lords Malak and Revan assaulted Dantooine." Perhaps it really doesn't matter to the locals whether only Malak was responsible, but it should matter to the Jedi.*

*I never foresaw that I would live in such times. But then there has been much in the*

*past five decades that our Order did not foresee. First the Jedi Knights Exar Kun and Ulic Qel-Droma proclaimed themselves Sith Lords, then—some thirty-six years later—Revan and Malak did the same. Besides the fact that all were Jedi, it may be noteworthy that Exar Kun, Revan, and Malak all trained on Dantooine.*

*Was history repeating itself? No, I think not, as these men had different motives for becoming Sith Lords. Exar Kun craved forbidden knowledge, and the misguided Qel-Droma sought to destroy the Sith from within; they forged an alliance with the Mandalorian warriors and started a war with the Jedi. Revan and Malak, on the other hand, were at war with the Mandalorians after Exar Kun and Qel-Droma had been defeated, and... well, Revan and Malak were frustrated soldiers. I knew they were restless in their desires to defend the Republic, and when they attempted to stop the Mandalorians from conquering more fringe worlds, they were outraged by the Jedi Council's instructions to use caution and meditate on the situation.*

*Did anyone foresee that they would openly defy the Council, use the Mandalorians' own tactics to defeat them, then become warlords? That they would lead not only the surviving Mandalorians, but also many of the Republic crewers and Jedi Knights who had served with them throughout the Mandalorian Wars? Or that they would discover relics created by the pre-Republic Rakata civilization as well as numerous Sith artifacts, and use these in combination with their dark side powers to very nearly crush the Republic? That they would proclaim themselves the new Dark Lords of the Sith—Darth Revan and Darth Malak—and revive a Sith Academy on the Sith tombworld of Korriban?*



No. No one foresaw this. All that we, the Jedi, could do was try to stop the Sith Lords after the fact.

Bastila Shan was the only survivor of the Jedi strike team that apprehended Revan. Forgoing the options to imprison or execute the captive Sith Lord, the Council used the Force to scour Revan's memories, leaving him something of a blank slate. Masters Dorak and Zhar Lestin were able to mend Revan's damaged mind and retrain him in the ways of the Jedi. Yes, there was a purpose to all this. The Council had decided that the amnesiac Revan, reconditioned with a new identity as a Force-using soldier of the Republic, would be their best chance to defeat Malak. And they were right.

Paired with Bastila Shan, this altogether new incarnation of Revan went hunting for Malak and the Star Forge, an ancient Rakatan space station and manufacturing facility that Malak used to create an endless supply of vessels and weapons. Soon after the Jedi began their hunt, Malak razed the planets Taris and Dantooine.

Malak captured both Revan and Bastila, but Revan escaped and killed Malak's apprentice, the former Jedi student Bandon. However, Revan had discovered what the Council had done to him, and regained the memories the Council had erased.

Did he seek revenge against the Jedi? No, for he was not the same Revan he had been. Whether his revised self-awareness and ethics were the result of his reconditioning or of his new persona's unique experience and insight remains unknown, but we can

be thankful that his transformation was for the better. He chose to rescue Bastila, whom Malak had tortured and transformed into his new apprentice. Revan not only brought Bastila back from the dark side, but killed Darth Malak and destroyed the Star Forge as well.

If only the Sith threat had ended there. Since the destruction of the Star Forge, there have been reports of the existence of others, Sith calling themselves Darth Traya, Darth Sion, and Darth Nihilus. An unconfirmed report suggests that Nihilus was responsible for the catastrophe that killed all life on the planet Katarr last year, including the entire Jedi Convocation that had gathered there to discuss the future of our Order. It was there that Master Dorak perished, along with Zhar Lestin, Vandar Dokar, and so many, many others. Here, on Dantooine, Masters Zez-Kai Ell, Kavar, and Vrook Lamar all fell to Darth Traya.

Do I think Revan redeemed himself? I don't know that it is the place of a historian to make such a judgment, and I shall leave this to the philosophers. I will say this. By erasing Revan's memory, the Council ensured that Revan could never entirely be the same man who conquered the Mandalorians and became a Sith Lord. But it was this new Revan, when he chose not to return to the dark side, who ultimately chose to reform on his own terms.

We will never be able to restore the Jedi enclave that was on Dantooine, but Revan's example encourages me to rebuild.

**3660bby**

### **Smuggler's Vanguard**

A fiery comet blazed past the moons of Talus, leaving a trail of amber dust. It spent only moments in view of the pilot's seat, but it caught the attention of Hylo Viz. A comet was a sign of change -- an omen that could be either good or bad. She wanted to consider its meaning later, when she had more time. Just now, the Crimson Fleece had dropped out of hyperspace, and Hylo was steering the ship toward its destination, the still-distant form of Corellia. Normally, she enjoyed the peaceful moments between completing a hyperspace jump and entering a planet's atmosphere, but not today. Today, the Fleece was carrying valuable cargo, and two passengers Hylo would just as soon have left back on Nar Shaddaa.

The flight from Hutt Space had taken no longer than planned, but Hylo had been counting the minutes. The goon camping in her co-pilot's seat--his name was Musk--gabbed incessantly in his own form of crude Basic. Musk was trying to show off his knowledge of the inner politics of the Hutt Crime Cartel. Based on his naive analysis, he was criticizing his boss, Barrga the Hutt, for making all the wrong decisions. Hylo had no basis for knowing the wisdom of Barrga's actions, but she was willing to bet that Musk didn't either. Of course, this kind of talk was no surprise; most of the Hutts' hired guns spent their time gossiping about their bosses' behaviors. She could have forgiven him this; Musk was a Nikto, not exactly known for their brilliance. But he hadn't stopped there.

"Good for me to get off Nar Shaddaa." Musk scratched his scaly chin. "Ever since we pull Star Cluster Cantina job, I always have to be watching my back."

Hylo stifled a laugh.

"You weren't in on that operation."

"What do you know, girl?" Musk bristled at having his lie challenged. "You think Barrga the only boss I work for?"

The Star Cluster Casino job was one of the most notorious operations in years. Professional thieves had broken in and fixed the casino's computers. The thieves returned the next business day and made a fortune in a series of inconspicuous

bets. It was weeks before the Star Cluster's owners discovered the glitch, and by then, the thieves had vanished. Like anyone else even slightly "plugged-in" on Nar Shaddaa, Hylo knew the Star Cluster job was too delicate to have been pulled off by anyone from the usual underworld circles. Apparently, Musk didn't realize the absurdity of his claim. He was obviously trying to impress her, though, and that was a card she wanted to keep in her hand for now. She decided to back down.

"I figured whoever pulled that job was long gone by now." She shrugged in acceptance of his lie. "If you say it was you, I have no cause to doubt it."

"Yeah, I made many credits on that deal. Soon I'll be running my own gang. You'll see." Musk tightened his lips, probably wondering if she really believed him.

Turning back to the controls, Hylo unconsciously slid her hand down the side of her blue leather pants to touch the holster strapped to her thigh. There was no reason to think she'd need her blaster, but it was always nice to know it was there if she did.

After a few minutes of silence, Musk started off on another rambling monologue, apparently as glad as she was to let the Star Cluster conversation die.

Hylo closed her eyes and tried to drown out Musk's guttural droning. She focused on the sound of the Fleece's engines -- a sound she knew better than the sound of her own voice. Hylo had often claimed that she could pinpoint any of the ship's technical problems just by spending a few minutes listening to the engine. Her claim usually drew a skeptical laugh, but it was the truth. She knew the sound of the ship's engines well enough to notice the slightest skip or stutter. She had repaired the Fleece enough times to know what most of these aberrational sounds meant as well.

The Crimson Fleece was nothing like the ship she originally purchased. In the decade since she scraped together enough credits to buy the old wreck, she had replaced nearly every part, some of them more than once. Because of its age, most of the original parts were no longer available, but Hylo had improvised -- buying scraps from other ships and rigging them together. After her latest round of upgrades, the Fleece was probably worth triple its original value, but it would take an expert mechanic to recognize that fact. She'd never be able to get even half of what the ship was worth if she tried to sell it, so she didn't bother. It

suiting her needs well enough for now, but she knew someday she'd have to replace it, just to give herself another renovation project, if nothing else.

"Unidentified vessel, please transmit identification and clearance codes." A business-like voice blared from the communication console, stunning Musk into a welcome silence. Hylo looked out the window, quickly locating the orbital security station from which the request came.

"Transmitting now," Hylo replied, as her fingers danced across the control panel to send the information. She then leaned back in her seat, knowing it would take a few minutes for Corellian security to cross-check the codes.

Musk grunted as he reached up to cockpit ceiling. "Power down the hyperdrive generator?"

"No!" Hylo sat up in a flash and slapped his hand away from the switch. "Leave it on standby. I never turn it off until the job's done. Bad luck."

Musk's first reaction to having his hand slapped was anger, but he decided to laugh it off instead.

"You Mirialans crazy." He shook his head and chuckled before standing up and leaving the cabin.

Hylo watched him go, feeling more than a little uncomfortable. Leaving the hyperdrive generator on had nothing to do with her being Mirialan, of course. Like having her blaster on her side, having the hyperdrive generator on standby was just something that felt reassuring.

She presumed Musk left the cockpit to update his partner, a Weequay with a name Hylo couldn't even pronounce, let alone remember. Unlike Musk, the Weequay was quiet, darkly quiet. Hylo knew the type well; his deadly, cold-blooded stare told her all she needed to know. He was the type she'd typically avoid working with at all cost. In this case, however, she'd had no choice. Barrga the Hutt had sent the two thugs as her "escorts." What that really meant is they were watching to make sure Hylo didn't try to cheat the boss. When the stakes were high, this was standard operating procedure.



In general, Barrga, like most of the other Hutts, actually trusted Hylo. She had worked for the Cartel on and off for years now, and before that, she had practically grown up as a grease rat working in the Cartel's cargo docks.

Hylo lived on Nar Shaddaa most of her life, but she was born on Balmorra. Her father worked as a droid designer until the war started, when he was caught in the crossfire during an Imperial raid. Only a child at the time, Hylo fled the planet with her mother and hundreds of other refugees.

Weeks later, during a pit stop on Nar Shaddaa, her mother had fallen ill and the refugee transport had left them behind. Her mother died soon thereafter, leaving Hylo with nothing but a handful of credits and the clothes on her back.

She wound up running with a gang of similarly-orphaned alien street urchins, sneaking through Nar Shaddaa's ducts and alleyways, stealing and scrounging to survive. Most of those kids wound up getting killed or becoming thugs for one of Nar Shaddaa's numerous crime lords. Hylo had been lucky, though. As a teenager, she discovered her natural skill with machines and became a mechanic in the grimy shipyards deep in Nar Shaddaa's Undercity. It earned her enough to get by. From the first time she actually sat in the pilot's seat, though, Hylo knew she wanted to spend more time flying starships than fixing them.

She saved every credit she earned until she had enough to buy the Crimson Fleece, and then she began hiring herself out as a freighter captain. The Hutt Cartel didn't hire just any ship available, though. She'd had to take any work she could get those first few years. That's when she made the mistake of picking up a job from the Sith Empire -- a mistake she'd never make again. She had learned the hard way that the only time the Imperials hired freelancers is when they were looking for expendable labor. Fortunately, working her connections among the mechanics, and earning a reputation for success, Hylo finally got the attention of the Hutts, and never looked back. Running black market goods and technology all over the galaxy, the Hutts had no shortage of work for freelancers. Hylo made a decent living and still got to be her own boss.

Hylo was, in fact, thinking about how she was going to spend the credits for this job when Musk returned to the cockpit with a new air of urgency.

"Why we still waiting?" He didn't sit down, but looked through the window at the orbital security station with irritation.

"Well, somehow I suspect they won't let us enter Corellia's atmosphere until they give us clearance," Hylo smiled, confident that Musk wouldn't detect her sarcasm.

"Tell them we need to land now," Musk ordered angrily. "We have business." He looked at her expectantly.

She reminded herself that Musk was just hired muscle. He couldn't know the stupidity of his suggestion "This isn't Nar Shaddaa, Musk. They have rules here," she smiled patiently.

"We break no rules." Musk shrugged and looked at Hylo suspiciously. "They should be expecting us. You call now."

"Listen friend, just because I let you up here doesn't make you co-pilot." She looked him in eye with firm resolve. "This is my ship, and I'm in charge."

Hylo leaned her chair back against the console, projecting an air of relaxed confidence. "We wait until they call us. That's the way it works." Go ahead and push it; I dare you. She was ready to reach for her blaster, if necessary.

She watched the wheels turn slowly in Musk's head as he considered how to react. His puzzled expression suggested he would back down, but then it ceased to be an issue.

"Crimson Fleece, your codes have been verified. Welcome to Corellia." The voice of Corellian security was no friendlier than it had been before. "Please proceed directly to landing pad A-17 at the Rendili Corporate facility. Sending coordinates."

Now it was Hylo's turn to look puzzled. She sat up with a start and keyed into the communication console.

"You mean we're not landing at a military spaceport?" Barrga had never specified where the deal would take place, but Hylo knew the drives were going to the Republic military. She had assumed they'd land at a military facility.

"Says here you're delivering a shipment to the Rendili Vehicle Corporation." The voice sounded irritated, expressing some degree of humanity for the first time.

"All Republic military facilities are strictly off-limits to non-military personnel. We are at war, you know."

"I'm not stupid," Hylo sighed and shook her head. "All right, fine, just tell them we're on the way."

"You're welcome." The security agent spat sarcastically and closed the connection.

Hylo laughed and settled back in her seat. She looked back and noticed that Musk had again left the cockpit. She didn't bother to wonder why. She enjoyed the moment of solitude and simply reminded herself this would all be over soon. This might be the last job I do for the Cartel, she reminded herself.

Recently, Hylo had been finding work elsewhere. She had done some corporate deliveries and even some jobs for the Republic. Though Republic policy had previously been to hire only licensed and certified freighter captains, the Republic military had been having trouble finding help to transport supplies. Imperial influence had spread far and wide, and working for the Republic had become a risky enterprise. Most pilots shied away from such work, but not Hylo.

Not only did Hylo's sympathies lie with the Republic, but she enjoyed taking risks. From her time flying, she had come to firmly believe that anything was possible, as long as she had faith in herself. It was doubt and fear that caused people to fail. So Hylo consciously projected a relentless confidence and trusted fate. There was one major exception, though, and that was when she saw the signs of impending misfortune. Bad luck began in the small things, things that were seemingly unimportant. Her father's landspeeder had broken down on the last day he left for the lab.

Her mother had stained her favorite robes just before she fell ill. Hylo had concluded that these weren't coincidences, but were actually the universe's way of warning people. From this, she had deduced that small troubles and accidents would be followed by deadly catastrophes if she didn't act on the warnings. Hylo would have been embarrassed to share this idea with anyone else, but such beliefs had saved her life enough times; she no longer questioned them.

On the positive side, if there were no warning signs, then there was no danger. She could fly fast and loose, and come out without a scratch. It was the Invisible Law of the Universe. So far on this excursion, the signs had all been good.

As the Crimson Fleece descended into Corellia's atmosphere, Hylo studied the landscape, taking it all in. She had lost count of the number of planets she had visited, but she had never seen Corellia. She was surprised to find herself feeling a childlike sense of curiosity and adventure. Corellia had a reputation for individuality. It had all the amenities available on any of the other core worlds, but great care had been taken to ensure it did not become a city-world. Large green spaces dominated the planet's surface, efficiently laid out between industrial and residential sectors. Surprisingly, Hylo had heard that such environmentally responsible planning had come from Corellia's corporations. She was glad to see proof that not all financial enterprises were as greedy and destructive as those she was familiar with on Nar Shaddaa.

As the Rendili facility came into view, Hylo drew in a breath. The architecture was a dazzling combination of elegance and efficiency. The upper levels of several towers were interwoven with tiered promenades and spacious offices with large viewports. Beneath the towers was a labyrinth of modern-looking industrial facilities. There was even a green space that appeared to serve as testing grounds for the company's projects. She saw a fascinating assortment of vehicles in various places on the corporate campus, from mainstream-looking airspeeders to other types of transport she hardly recognized. Her mechanically inclined mind was consumed in theorizing on the function and purpose of these mysterious machines.

Hylo's sense of wonder was smashed, however, when Musk re-entered the cockpit and climbed back into the co-pilot's seat. His blaster rifle was now slung over his back, and it clumsily bumped the side of her chair. Musk didn't even notice. What paranoid ruffians we'll probably look like to these people, she thought. The idea crossed her mind to actually leave her blaster behind, but she laughed it away. These people knew she was working for a Hutt. They wouldn't think much of her whether she was wearing a blaster or not.

"A-17. Right there." Musk was scrutinizing the maze of architecture below them. "What are you waiting for?" He was clearly ready to get this over with.

"I know. I'm going." Her spirits boosted by the environment, Hylo flashed Musk a genuinely friendly smile.

As she eased the Fleece down toward the landing pad, Hylo started thinking about the credits again. Though she had found flying for the Republic to be

exhilarating and at least somewhat morally rewarding, the pay wasn't all that good and the jobs were still scarce. She had taken this job from Barrga the Hutt because she needed the credits. Her commission for this job would be sizeable, and for good reason -- the cargo was a crate of prototype ion drives.

Despite the fact that Nar Shaddaa was one of the shadiest places in the galaxy, and partially because of that fact, it was where many of the galaxy's most advanced technologies were developed. Unscrupulous corporations seeking to avoid Republic regulations set up labs deep in the moon's lower city and developed technologies that were both very dangerous and very valuable. Most of these corporations marketed their technologies through the Cartel and other crime syndicates to avoid liability. Hylo didn't know who had developed the ion drives she was carrying in her cargo hold, but she knew why they were valuable. Such drives would increase a ship's sublight thrust capabilities, giving starfighters a major advantage in battle. Both the Republic and the Empire would pay top credit for any edge they could get in the war, and this would be a big one. Hylo was glad that the ion drives were going to the Republic's military. They could use a little help, she knew.

She also knew that these prototypes were just a teaser shipment. If the Republic military tried out the drives and liked them, they'd order hundreds, if not thousands. If Barrga remained the middle-man, this could be the best deal the Hutt had ever made.

Unable to resist her own curiosity, Hylo had slipped into the main cargo bay during the flight and taken a peek. From what she could tell, the drives were the real thing. That was good, because if Barrga was trying to cheat the Republic military, Hylo didn't want any part of it. She knew all too well that the courier was the one who usually paid for a client's betrayal.

As the Fleece finally came to rest on the landing pad, Hylo ran a quick check on her sublight engine--the ignition system, in particular. The ignition system had been giving her trouble and she wanted to make sure she could fire the Fleece back up without a problem. The ignition system checked out fine, though, and she powered down the sublight engines. As long as she left the hyperdrive generator on standby, she could quickly divert power over and be out of Corellia's atmosphere in seconds if the need should arise. As she scanned the control panel, however, she noticed the ship's rear stabilizer was slightly offset. She frowned. There's another part I'll need to replace soon. For now, it just meant she needed to recalibrate the stabilizer outside the ship.

As she rose from her seat, she nearly bumped heads with Musk who had chosen the exact same moment to get up from the co-pilot's seat. He gave her a leering grin and leaned back to allow her to leave the cockpit first. She could feel his eyes on her backside as she hurried through the ship's lounge to lower the landing hatch. Keep dreaming, pal, she smiled to herself. She pulled the release and watched as the gangplank slowly lowered to the ground.

As she stepped down through the hatchway, a cool breeze assaulted her senses with relief. Being cooped up in the cockpit with a Nikto had given her new appreciation for the value of fresh air. Preoccupied with her thoughts and the task at hand, Hylo was caught completely by surprise when she heard the high-pitched voice of a protocol droid address her from across the platform.

"Excuse me, miss, but I'm afraid there's been some mistake. This is landing pad A-17. You're not cleared to land here and you'll need to move your starship right away." The protocol droid spoke with a polite demeanor, but Hylo recognized a note of disdain. Hylo didn't dislike droids, but she didn't trust them either. She suspected it was a subconscious hang-up related to her father's death, but she could see no reason to try to overcome it.

"The mistake is somewhere on your end, because this is where Corellian security told me to land." She deliberately turned her attention toward a steam exhaust port on the bottom of the Fleece that was dripping liquid. She knew it was just water, but she made a show of catching a few drops and looking at them in the light.

She sensed that the protocol droid was about to politely persist, but the droid stopped short as Musk walked heavily down the gangplank.

"We come from Barrga the Hutt. We have special delivery for Rendili Company. Go check computer." His blaster rifle still slung across his shoulder, Musk smiled cruelly at the droid, daring it to protest.

"Very well. I'll reconfirm," the droid chirped compliantly, "but I can assure you that no deliveries were on the schedule for today. I'll be right back." The droid turned and teetered back across the platform toward the tower's cargo doors.

Send someone back who actually has a personality, Hylo thought to herself. She smiled at her own prejudice and looked up to see Musk shoot her a short, skeptical glance before walking back up into the ship.

Enjoying the moment of quiet and the fresh air, Hylo casually held her finger up to trace the contour of the Fleece's underbelly as she made her way back to the rear stabilizer. She looked around, noting the efficient and immaculate nature of the landing pad. Suspended dozens of meters above the ground and connected to the tower only by a thin platform, there was far less danger of the thievery common to the Cartel landing pads on Nar Shaddaa. Other than a few empty cargo containers stacked neatly at the edge of the platform, the landing pad was perfectly bare.

Reaching the rear stabilizer, Hylo popped open the external control box and released the pressure valve. A puff of steam burst from the vent and the stabilizer made an almost imperceptible adjustment. Hylo gently closed the control box and sauntered back over to gangplank. After one last look at the outside world, she turned to walk back up into the ship and suddenly froze. She heard something.

She turned around in a flash, scanning the area again to try to identify the source of the sound. Seeing nothing, she cocked her head to the side and craned her neck, hoping to more accurately identify what she heard. Then she realized; it wasn't what she was hearing, it was what she wasn't hearing. Something was missing: a small, faint buzzing, very familiar and very important. The hyperdrive generator had been turned off.

Infuriated, Hylo dashed up the gangplank. She charged into the ship's lounge to find Musk sitting on a bench, leaning back against the bulkhead with his eyes closed. Sensing her angst, his eyes popped open and without moving a muscle, he raised his eyebrow to casually question her demeanor.

"What have you done, you blasted monkey-lizard?" She choked out the question through gritted teeth. "I am the captain of this ship. You have no right to even touch the controls" - she trailed off, recognizing his truly mystified expression.

"Don't know what you're talking about." Musk looked her directly in the eye. He almost looked a little afraid.

"Don't tell me the hyperdrive generator shut down by itself." Even as she was saying the words, she realized from Musk's expression that this was probably the case. She headed to the cockpit to check the control panel.

An icy chill ran down her spine and sucked the wind out of her stomach. The indicator for the hyperdrive generator had a hollow, dead look that clearly signaled a significant problem. This is bad. In an instant, Hylo's spunky energy was sapped completely and she felt at once like a little girl, lost and alone in Nar Shaddaa's streets. As she stood there, transfixed by the dead indicator, Musk stepped up behind her. He leaned into the cockpit to see the indicator himself, brushing up against Hylo in a way that she would never have allowed a few minutes before. At this moment, though, Musk's offensive presence was not even a distraction compared to the sheer terror she was feeling.

"Probably just need recharging," the Nikto observed casually. He ducked back out of the cockpit and started walking down the corridor toward the lounge, but he stopped cold upon hearing Hylo's reply.

"No. This is a sign." She was still staring at the dead indicator, but her inner reserves of strength were calming the shakiness she felt inside. It all made sense now -- the corporate landing pad, the rude protocol droid, the fact that their delivery wasn't on the schedule -- it was a trap. The suspicious nature of these facts hadn't been lost on Hylo, but they were irrelevant until the hyperdrive generator broke. Now they added up to positive proof that something bad was about to happen.

"It's better we get off-planet," Hylo mumbled to herself as she sat back down in the pilot's seat. "We'll lay low on one of Talus's moons. I can check and see what happened to the hyperdrive generator." She glanced out the window to see that the landing pad was still completely empty, even as she pressed the button to raise the landing ramp.

"They're definitely planning something." She reached up and powered on the sublight engines.

"What you doing?" Musk was bewildered.

"You're just going to have to trust me on this." Hylo kept her eyes on the cargo doors. Any moment she expected the doors to burst open and blaster cannons



to be aimed at the Fleece. She gripped the controls to lift off, but then she felt the hard barrel of Musk's blaster rifle jab into the back of her neck.

"No no. We go nowhere, crazy girl." Musk's voice wasn't angry or mean, but it carried a note of something far more dangerous, fear. It was clear that he thought Hylo had lost her mind, and was likely willing to shoot her if he had to. Hylo's mind spun. I should have known Musk would react this way. I might be playing right into the catastrophe I'm trying to avoid. She loosened her grip on the controls and slumped forward in the seat. She felt Musk relax slightly, but his rifle was still pointed at the back of her head. It was risky, but she knew what she had to do next. She dropped her head into her hands and feigned a sob. Instinctively wanting to comfort her, Musk took a step forward.

Hylo's elbow came up fast and hard, knocking the barrel of Musk's blaster rifle into the ceiling. She spun out of her seat to come up beneath it. Realizing he'd been tricked, Musk bared his teeth, but then gasped breathless as Hylo dealt him a powerful kick to the groin.

Falling to his knees in the tight corridor, Musk tried to lower his blaster rifle to point it at Hylo's face, but she was too quick. In one fluid motion, her right hand caught the barrel of his rifle, and her left hand flashed by her holster and came up holding her blaster to Musk's forehead.

"Drop it." Give me an excuse and I will shoot you, she thought, but Musk let go. She jerked the rifle from his hand and tossed into the pilot's seat, but she had no idea what to do next. Improvising, she kept her blaster at Musk's head and slid around behind him in the corridor.

"You crazy, crazy dumb girl." Musk kept his hands up, but he was shaking his head. "Barrga gonna kill you for this."

He thinks I don't have the guts to pull the trigger.

"I'll take that risk." She grabbed the back of Musk's shirt and jerked him along toward the lounge.

She glanced back and recognized the smell, but she never had a chance to react. Musk's Weequay partner had finally decided to emerge from wherever he had been. The stock of the Weequay's blaster rifle smashed into Hylo's face before she could even register what was happening. Everything went black.

\* \* \*

Hylo's eyes fluttered open. Only seconds had passed since the Hutt's thugs had knocked her unconscious. She could hazily make out the two figures standing over her.

"She's not safe. She's crazy. Better we just kill her." Embarrassed at having been rescued from such a position, Musk's Nikto voice was overflowing with frustration.

Though still only half-conscious, Hylo started to protest, but she found her mouth was numb from having the Weequay's rifle butt slammed into it. Her swollen lips couldn't form the words.

Fortunately, the Weequay didn't even consider her a credible threat. "No. If Barrga wants her dead, he'll want to do it himself." He flashed Musk a broken-toothed smile.

The Weequay reached down and grabbed one of the straps on Hylo's vest. "We'll lock her in the second cargo bay. We'll bring Barrga the credits and the traitor. He might even pay us a bonus."

As the Weequay dragged her back to the second cargo bay, Hylo allowed herself to go limp. She looked back through half-closed eyelids to see Musk's face wrinkled with doubt. He wasn't happy with the fact that Barrga was going to hear the details of this story. I don't blame him, she thought. She would have felt sorry for Musk, but she knew the Weequay would soon have something to be embarrassed for as well.

Musk wasn't the brains of the operation, but neither was his partner. If either of the two had thought their decision through, they might have realized their error. Hylo had been smuggling people and goods in the Crimson Fleece for years. She would have been caught and killed long before the trip to Corellia if she hadn't installed escape hatches in her cargo holds.

Within minutes of the Weequay closing and locking the door to the second cargo bay, Hylo had squirmed through the small drop-panel and was sliding out the escape hatch on the bottom of the Fleece.

The cool, clean air again assaulted her senses, calming her nerves. It did nothing, however, to soothe the stinging pain of her battered lips. She gently nursed her jaw as she looked around the landing pad to make sure that it was indeed still devoid of life. That could change any second. She scrambled across the landing pad to the only place she could hide -- the empty cargo containers sitting at the edge of the platform.

Stashing herself between two of the containers, Hylo wracked her brain for a plan. She worried that the thugs would check the cargo hold and discover her escape. She needed to act quickly. She needed to get her ship back and fly away from this place as fast as she could. Without a blaster, though, this wasn't going to be easy.

Hylo's racing thoughts slammed to a stop when she heard the hiss of the cargo doors opening at the other end of the platform. She peeked out, not knowing what to expect, but was still startled to see a stately-looking businessman step out onto the platform with the protocol droid at his side. Wearing a red-sequined suit with tails and a high collar, he was clearly a well-paid corporate representative. Though his brisk pace and furrowed brow suggested he was worrying about something, his distant look suggested it had nothing to do with the task at hand. The Rendili representative walked across the platform toward the Crimson Fleece with the protocol droid desperately trying to keep up.

Behind them emerged two utility droids hauling what appeared to be boxes of credits. A single armed guard accompanied them, his pose suggesting this was just another day at the office. Way too relaxed to be anticipating a fight, she observed. Hylo was trying to study the entourage more closely, but her view was blocked when the landing hatch from the Fleece popped open and lowered to the ground. Hylo saw the edge of Musk's form tramping down the gangplank, and she ducked back into her hiding spot.

She unconsciously began biting her swollen lip as she considered this turn of events. Despite her suspicions, the group appeared to be exactly what it was supposed to be. Maybe this deal is totally legitimate. She was starting to doubt her instincts. For a brief moment, Hylo even considered just coming out and apologizing to everyone, but she knew it was too late for that. Besides, she had never gone wrong when reading the signs, and if there had ever been a clear sign of impending bad luck, the broken hyperdrive generator was it. She resolved to wait a little longer.

Her heartbeat speeding up in fear, Hylo dared to steal another look at the scene on the landing pad. The thugs and the Rendili representative had stepped to the side of the landing ramp. The utility droids had set down the boxes of credits and rolled up into the Fleece. Hylo knew they'd be emerging any moment with the ion drives, and the deal would be done. She closed her eyes and found she could barely hear the conversation taking place by the landing ramp.

"You're not the first," the Rendili representative was saying in a friendly way, "this happens every now and then. We have mechanics here, but they're much better at building starships than repairing them." The representative's voice sounded like he was pleased with himself for something.

"Tell you what," the representative continued, "once we're done here, you can hop right over to Coronet City. I'll call ahead and make arrangements for your hyperdrive to get looked at right away."

"Your kindness is appreciated." Hylo flushed with fury to hear the Weequay making arrangements to have her ship repaired. She started nervously grinding her teeth as she watched the utility droids roll down the gangplank with the ion drives.

"The drives are all accounted for, sir," the protocol droid chirped. The representative nodded, and the three droids proceeded across the platform toward the entrance to the building.

"Very well then," the Rendili representative nodded at armed guard, "the credits are all yours." The guard stepped back from the credits and turned to follow the droids.

"A pleasure doing business with you." The Weequay was bowing to the representative. "I will tell Barrga of your hospitality."

"Thank you." The representative didn't bother to return the Weequay's gesture. "I'll have flight control transmit the coordinates to the repair facility in Coronet City."

The representative walked away, resuming his brisk pace, and likely heading toward his next appointment.

Musk and the Weequay each took a box of credits and walked up the gangplank into the Fleece. They would have to make a few trips, Hylo realized.

She ducked back down into hiding and weighed her options. She could try to sneak back onto the ship before they took off, but she couldn't go back through the escape hatch. She'd have to walk right up the gangplank, and it was unlikely she could do that without being seen. Even if she did pull it off, what would she do? Hide until they get back to Nar Shaddaa? Sneak back into the hold and plead her case to Barrga? The options weren't attractive.

If she stayed here, though, what would she do? Go inside and ask someone from Rendili to help her? Somehow that seemed even worse than facing Barrga, but maybe she was just being paranoid.

Still wrestling with what to do, Hylo stole another peek out on the landing pad and was startled to realize that her choice had already been made. Barrga's thugs had already loaded up all the credits, and the landing hatch was closing as she watched. Hylo was dumbstruck.

Before she could react, she heard the Fleece's sublight engines engage. Moments later, she watched in shock as the ship lifted off the landing pad. I just lost my ship, she realized. She had never felt so powerless. Her throat ran dry, and she choked back a desperate sob. She held herself in tight control, but a tear escaped her eye and rolled down her cheek as she watched the Crimson Fleece fly away. She knew she needed to figure out what to do next, but she couldn't take her eyes off the ship as it reached a safe altitude and lurched away. Get a grip on yourself. She forced herself to look away.

A thunderous boom shook the landing pad.

She looked up. The Crimson Fleece had exploded. Flames shot out like fireworks, only to evaporate into large wisps of smoke. She watched in awed silence as the cloud of dust that was her ship slowly dissipated. Minutes passed, and Hylo just continued to stare at the empty space.

Finally recovering from her shock, she realized that the signs hadn't lied. Those boxes of credits must have been wired with explosives. She had been right.

Hylo looked back at the cargo doors, half expecting the representative and the protocol droid would be standing there, smiling at their successful act of

treachery. No one was there, though, just the cold, clean emptiness of the landing pad. Perhaps the representative didn't even know about the explosives. Hylo tried to sift through the facts to figure out the truth, but then she realized it didn't matter. The Rendili Vehicle Corporation had betrayed Barrga the Hutt and blown up Hylo's ship -- the truth was that she was lucky to be alive.

Hylo dropped back down into her hiding place heavily, and began to cry. The Crimson Fleece had been her ticket to freedom, her means of making a living, and really, her best friend. She had invested all her credits and all her heart into the Fleece. She had known it would be hard to sell, but in all her dreams and nightmares, she had never imagined that she'd lose the Fleece like this. She wasn't ready. It just didn't seem right. Hylo continued to sob quietly for some time, but when she stopped, she felt at peace.

Despite the loss of her ship, her painfully swollen lip, and the terrible predicament she was in, Hylo was comforted by the knowledge that she had seen and recognized the signs. She had trusted her instincts, and survived because of it. It was a confirmation of her ability to take care of herself. Somehow, she knew that the danger was past. She was now clear to take whatever risks were necessary without fear of disaster. Truly, this was more important than anything.

Hylo stayed in her hiding place until sundown, simply relaxing, making no effort to come up with a plan, not even really thinking. She rested her swollen lip up against the cold metal wall of the cargo container, and watched the sun slowly make its way toward the horizon. When she finally sat up, darkness was settling in. She gently touched her face. The swelling had gone down. It was time to move.

Despite the onset of night, there was no plausible way to hide on the empty landing pad, so Hylo didn't bother trying to be subtle. She dashed across the platform at top speed, counting on her luck to keep her from being seen.

When she reached cargo doors, she was relieved to find they weren't locked. The doors slid open silently, and Hylo cautiously stuck her head in to discover a wide, colorless hallway, as immaculately barren as the landing pad outside.

After ensuring there were no guards and no security cameras, Hylo stepped lightly into the hallway. She had no sense of the building's layout, so she simply started walking down the hallway, looking for any indication of an exit. She soon

found a stairwell, and headed downstairs. After descending several flights, she emerged on the lower level to a comforting sensation. The stairwell exited onto a catwalk elevated over a massive garage. The familiar smells of lubricant oil, burning metal, and fresh paint put her at ease. This was somewhere she could fit in.

Hylo was further pleased to hear the sounds of work going on across the garage. Dozens of starfighters in various states of construction were laid out in rows along the garage floor. Judging by the variety of models and the strangeness of some of the parts, these were all prototype projects. Hylo took a deep breath -- what would she give to be able to spend a few days tinkering around in here.

Only a handful of the vehicles were being worked on at the current time, but she sensed there were at least a few dozen mechanics at work, measuring, welding, and bolting together parts in different areas of the garage. From the catwalk, Hylo could clearly see the garage floor, but she would be hard to make out from the floor, so she stepped out and crossed the catwalk to another set of stairs that took her down to the garage floor right beside an open office.

Seeing through the observation window that the office was empty, Hylo slid through the door and found exactly what she was looking for, a rack of overalls. No garage would be complete without them. Hylo rifled through the rack until she found the smallest suit, and quickly put it on over her leathers. It was a little large, but after she tightened the belt it wasn't too awkward looking. Seeing her reflection in a piece of junk durasteel, Hylo realized that her short, red-highlighted hair, though fashionable on Nar Shaddaa, might look a little strange here. She found a welding helmet and put it on, raising the visor. As heavy and clumsy as it might be, a good disguise was more important right now. Confident that she now looked the part, she turned to leave the office.

She was almost out the door when it occurred to her to check the holo-terminal on the desk. She was expecting it to be secured, but she was pleased to find that she was able access to the network quickly. She was hoping to find a blueprint for the entire Rendili facility, but she had to settle for a layout diagram for the building she was in. 'Building A' was apparently dedicated to the research and development and of light starships. Makes sense this is where they'd want the ion drives delivered, she thought to herself.

She hadn't given it much thought earlier, but now she realized the corporation's motives for double-crossing Barrga. Rendili had no interest in buying ion drives

from Nar Shaddaa. They simply wanted to examine the prototypes and figure out how to replicate them. If Rendili had pulled something like this with a Republic-aligned corporation, legal safeguards would have prevented them from stealing the technology. Ripping off one of Hutts, however, had no legal implications whatsoever. Hylo might have smiled at the irony the Hutts getting their own game played against them, but it wasn't funny when it had cost her the Fleece. She wondered if the Republic military would have known about the plot. She decided to give them the benefit of the doubt and assume that the plan had been purely corporate. At this point, though, it would be impossible to expose Rendili's treachery. If she was certain of one thing, it was that a corporation this size would have taken care to cover its tracks.

As Hylo searched the building's blueprints for an inconspicuous exit, her eyes were drawn to flashing schedule reminder on the holo-terminal. Apparently, a test flight was scheduled on landing pad A-23 for the "Vanguard" project. Intrigued, Hylo opened the datafile and discovered the "Vanguard" was a high-speed corvette starfighter that Rendili had been developing for several years. As impressive as the ship's specifications were, though, what truly shocked Hylo was the name of the client. The Vanguard was developed for the Jedi Order.

Hylo had flown from one side of the galaxy to the other. She had delivered contraband to several Republic-aligned military facilities, but she had never once met a member of the infamous Jedi Order. She had heard all the stories, of course. The Jedi had been regarded as the most feared warriors in the galaxy until the Sith Empire returned. The long war had provided ample evidence that the Jedi were as mortal as anyone else. Hylo had grown up in this environment, but she had been told of a time when bounty hunters and mercenaries spoke about the Jedi in hushed tones, and when no one would have dared to challenge the Jedi order. These days, it was not uncommon to hear lowlifes like Musk make claims at having slain Jedi. Hylo knew these were bold-faced lies, though, and she had always maintained a healthy fear of the Jedi. At the same time, she found the self-sacrificing and the fearlessness of the Jedi to be intriguing. She had always wanted to meet one. Today, however, her only interest was in escape.

A plan formed in Hylo's mind. She almost suppressed the notion out-of-hand, but her curiosity was too strong. If she could get up to A-23 before the test flight got off the ground, she just might be able to take a test flight of her own. She smiled to think of the satisfaction it would give her to steal a ship from the Rendili Corporation. Who knows? She might even be able to barter the ship for



Barrga's forgiveness. The thought of trying to steal the ship terrified her, but the upside was too attractive. This was a good risk, and right now the signs were in her favor.

Knowing that every second would only make the task more dangerous, Hylo left the office in a flash. She was about to head back into the stairwell when she noticed a convenient elevator. Confident in her disguise, she stepped in and discovered that landing pad A-23 was on the roof of the building.

The elevator reached A-23 and opened up to an environment completely different from the rest of the building. Classy looking carpet and expensive artwork -- this was clearly where Rendili executives entertained their most respectable clients. Quiet music was playing over a speaker system, preventing Hylo from hearing any nearby activity, but she didn't hesitate in walking down the hallway. As she walked, though, she realized how out-of-place she probably was, even in disguise. She was just thinking about ditching the overalls when she turned a corner and nearly knocked down a sharp-dressed, skinny woman in a suit similar to the Rendili representative from the landing pad. The woman was preoccupied studying a datapad, but looked up in shock at almost having been run over.

Hylo recognized immediately that she had walked into an observation room for landing pad A-23. She could see a large window on the far wall, but from her vantage point, she couldn't see the landing pad itself.

The interior of the observation room was well-appointed, featuring luxurious reclining chairs near the window, and a circular table in the rear with chairs carefully arranged for a friendly business meeting. It was from this table that the skinny businesswoman had arisen before coming face-to-face with Hylo.

"You can't be in here," the skinny businesswoman blurted out. "What are you doing?"

The thought of trying to knock the woman unconscious flashed through Hylo's mind, but her mouth opened instead.

"Boss sent me up here to check the alluvial dampers on the Vanguard one last time before the test flight." She hoped desperately that the woman lacked the mechanical knowledge to realize this was highly unlikely.

"Sorry, it's my first time to come up here." Hylo added hastily, trying to explain why she was completely lost.

A frustrated expression appeared on the woman's face. "Why is everything always last minute?" She nodded her head in the direction of a door down the corridor that Hylo assumed led to the landing pad.

Hylo smiled nervously at the woman despite the relief she felt inside. She nodded politely and headed down the corridor.

"Make it fast," the skinny businesswoman snapped at Hylo's back. "The client's going to be here any minute."

Hylo didn't look back but sped up. She stepped out the doors onto the landing pad and her breath caught in her throat. The most beautiful piece of machinery she had ever seen was right in front of her. The Vanguard was all shiny silver and red paneling flowing seamlessly back to a set of circular twin thrusters in the rear. The front of the ship expanded into a hammerhead, similar to the bridge design from the Republic's modern Star Cruisers, but turned horizontal, allowing for what Hylo expected would be an extremely spacious and comfortable cockpit. Of course, anything would be spacious compared to the closet-sized cockpit she was used to from the Fleece.

Remembering that she was still in a precarious situation, Hylo shook away the awe and strode across the platform to the ship. She ran her finger along the immaculate underbelly as she mounted the landing ramp and ascended into the ship.

Whatever sense of wonder Hylo had experienced upon seeing the exterior of the Vanguard was doubled on the inside. The electrical system had been powered up to welcome the client, and the ship's lounge was a museum of accessories Hylo had only dreamed of. From a state-of-the-art holocommunications terminal in the center of the room to the inviting red swivel seats placed around the room, no detail had been overlooked. If an upgrade was available, the Vanguard had it. Hylo reminded herself that she'd have plenty of time to explore the ship later and proceeded directly to the cockpit.

She was worried that the control configuration would be too advanced for her, but she was relieved to discover that the traditional set-up had been implemented. The most notable difference was that all the controls were backlit

to allow for dimmer lighting in the cockpit. In addition to the pilot and co-pilot's seats at the helm, there were two bucket seats in the rear corners of the cockpit for additional passengers.

Hylo was so excited she leapt over the chair-back to slide in the pilot's seat. In so doing, though, she snagged her overalls on the seat's acceleration strap, and the snag tore a rip down the leg of her suit. In an instant, Hylo's childlike optimism evaporated, and she sat in the pilot's seat petrified with horror.

She hadn't wanted to reflect on her exceptional good luck for fear of sabotaging it, but now it didn't matter. Since the moment the Fleece exploded, everything had gone her way. From conveniently finding a disguise in the garage to bluffing her way out onto landing pad 23, nothing negative had happened. The tear in her suit, however, reminded Hylo of the stain on her mother's dress, and every other sign of ill omen she had experienced in her entire life.

Hylo closed her eyes and swallowed hard. She decided she was going to pretend it hadn't happened. At this point, she had come too far to turn back. I'm going to steal it anyway. She tried to convince herself that all the good luck she had been having surely outweighed a simple tear in her overalls.

She gripped the Vanguard's controls and squeezed. If she was going to steal the ship, this was her chance. She looked over the dashboard and quickly located all the dials and switches she'd need to get out of Corellia's atmosphere. She reached up to ignite the sublight engines and stopped. The ignition switch wasn't there. She madly studied the overhead panel for it and gave up. She felt panic rising through her stomach as she carefully started examining the dashboard for the ignition.

In the next moment, her exasperation turned into adrenaline. She heard the sound of footsteps on the landing ramp. Without thinking, she dove across the cockpit and ducked behind the rear seat. Hidden in the shadows, she froze. She knew it would never happen, but she hoped against hope that the footsteps would turn and leave. No such luck.

Scrunched into a ball behind the rear seat, she couldn't get a clear view, but she made out the shadow of a man as he breezed into the cockpit and sat down in the pilot's seat. He was out of breath. He was in a hurry. She was glad of this. Otherwise, if he had looked around he might have seen her leg sticking out from behind the rear seat.

Hearing the pilot flip a few switches, Hylo decided he was probably preoccupied enough that she could prop herself up for a better view. Coming around the edge of the seat, she tried to size the pilot up. Though she couldn't see what he was wearing, she could see a corner of cloth that suggested he wasn't in any fancy test-pilot gear. She could also tell from his shoulder-length brown hair that he probably wasn't in the military.

Whoever he was, he was preparing for liftoff. As he raised the landing ramp, Hylo's hopes were rekindled. If it was just one man, she could probably take him out, especially if he was focused on the ship's controls. She considered waiting until after the ship had lifted off, but she decided that was too risky. If they were in the air, he'd be able to send the Vanguard into a nosedive if she didn't take him out in one blow. She watched for one more second and saw him reach underneath the dashboard to turn a knob she hadn't seen before. The sublight engines ignited. So that's where the ignition is.

Hylo quietly slid out from behind the seat on the floor directly behind the pilot.

"All systems online." He spoke into a headset.

She hadn't seen the headset before, so just hearing his voice caused Hylo's heart rate to skyrocket. His voice sounded friendly, non-business-like.

"Standby, Vanguard." A dispatcher's voice was responding into the headset, just loud enough that Hylo could hear. "We want to clear out some nearby air traffic so we can get a clean read on your liftoff velocity."

Hylo knew this moment's delay was her only opportunity. She glanced around quickly for something heavy with which to bash the pilot's head. The cockpit was as clean and efficient as everything else at Rendili, though, and there was nothing but the welding helmet that had fallen off Hylo's head when she vaulted into the rear seat. The helmet certainly wasn't ideal, but the crown was durasteel-reinforced, so it was better than nothing. Hylo gripped the helmet in both hands and rose up silently behind the pilot's seat.

Her hands froze. Hylo was looking down on a Jedi. She might not have deduced it simply by looking at the robes, but standing up, she could now see the lightsaber on his belt. She had never seen one, of course, but she had been intrigued enough to read up on the technology when she was still working as a mechanic.

There was no mistaking it. A million thoughts collided in Hylo's mind. How could she not have guessed this possibility? Why hadn't he sensed her? Would she be able to knock him out? Would he skewer her on his lightsaber?

Her thoughts were swept away, though, when the Jedi turned to look over his shoulder with a puzzled expression and found himself looking straight into Hylo's eyes. His surprise must have slowed his reflexes, because he seemed to sit still even as Hylo's instincts kicked in. She smashed down with all her might, slamming the helmet into the Jedi's face at an awkward angle. She raised the helmet for a repeat blow, but was startled to see it wasn't necessary. Miraculously, the Jedi's eyes had rolled back and his body was limp. He tumbled out of the pilot's seat and onto the floor headfirst.

Hylo didn't waste a moment considering the improbability. She first jerked the lightsaber off his belt and tossed it back into the corner. For some reason, that weapon terrified her. She gripped the Jedi's robes and hauled him out of the seat, laying him flat on the cockpit floor. She knew she couldn't risk leaving him restrained in the back. That would be pure insanity. The only safe thing is to kill him while he's unconscious, she realized. Hylo was about to look for something more lethal than the helmet to finish him off, but she looked at the Jedi's face instead.

He was pale for a human, but his skin had an ageless beauty to it that Hylo couldn't help but notice. If she had run into this guy in a cantina somewhere, she might have even been attracted to him. Strangely enough, he looked like he had fallen into a peaceful slumber. Killing a Jedi will probably bring me a lifetime of bad luck, she thought. She noticed where the Jedi's lip was swelling from being decked by the helmet. His injury was the mirror image of her own. She couldn't kill him.

"All right, we've cleared out that air traffic, Vanguard. You're clear for liftoff." The controller's voice emanated from the headset, reminding Hylo of the urgency of the moment.

She couldn't kill the Jedi, and she couldn't risk taking him with her, so she did the only thing possible. She reached up and hit the button to lower the landing ramp. I hope I don't regret this.

She grabbed his cloak behind the shoulders and dragged the Jedi across the clean floor of the ship. She almost stumbled when she reached the gangplank,

but used the Jedi's dead weight to keep herself from falling and continued pulling him down to the landing pad. At the bottom, she dragged him clear of the gangplank. She almost laughed. As crazy as she felt, she knew she was doing the right thing. She took one last look at the sleeping Jedi, and then she kissed her fingers and touched them lightly to his forehead. For good luck.

She dashed back up the ramp, into the cockpit and vaulted into the pilot's seat. This time, she took care not to snag the coveralls.

"Vanguard. What's going on out there?" She heard the tiny voice from the fallen headset.

She raised the landing ramp, and before it was even fully closed, she pulled the controls and lifted the Vanguard off the landing pad. The ship felt light and nimble, unlike anything she had ever flown before. Trusting her skills, she turned the ship skyward and engaged the thrusters full-throttle in one fluid motion. The Vanguard rocketed into the sky and out of sight.

Faster than Hylo would have dreamed it could go, the Vanguard sliced through the air and into space. Knowing that Rendili would move quickly to pursue, Hylo quickly punched in the coordinates to Nar Shaddaa, coordinates she had long since committed to memory. She powered up the hyperdrive generator and then experienced one last scary moment when she didn't hear the familiar whine. She realized quickly, though, the sounds of Vanguard would be totally different from the Fleece. When she punched it, the Vanguard leapt into hyperspace without hesitation.

She dropped out of hyperspace within sight of Hutta. Nar Shaddaa was on the far side of the planet right now, but a few minutes cruise, and she'd have a straight trajectory to her home.

She sighed as she considered how she would explain the situation to Barrga the Hutt. There was really nothing she could say that would make this any easier. Then a revolutionary thought crossed her mind.

No one knows I'm even alive. Barrga the Hutt would eventually discover she had been betrayed. He would learn that the Crimson Fleece had exploded moments after taking off. Barrga would assume, of course, that Hylo had died.

The Vanguard rounded the edge of Hutta and came within view of Nar Shaddaa. Hylo knew she couldn't just avoid the moon for the rest of her life, but returning now would be no easier than returning later. Besides, she reasoned, the Vanguard still needs its test flight. She made up her mind.

The thrill of a new adventure tickled her spine. There was an old friend she had promised to visit on Ord Mantell. As she turned the Vanguard around, she spied a small silvery comet in the distance. She decided it was a good sign.

**3660 bby**

### **The Old Republic Blogs**

#### **A Letter from Special Executive Rasmus Blys**

Greetings!

My name is Rasmus Blys, and I have the great honor of serving as a Special Executive for the [Czerka Corporation](#): the most dynamic business entity in the entirety of known space. Czerka's history is a long and storied one; we have centuries of innovation and success to look back on, with entire worlds owing their economic and social development to our valuable insights and generous cooperation. When we consider everything that our corporation has achieved, I think we can all rightly take a great deal of pride in our roles in the Czerka of today.

But what exactly is my role? Just what does the "Special Executive" for CZ-198 do all day, anyway?

I like to think of CZ-198 as a castle: a fortified home where our Czerka family can join together and carry out our great works in an atmosphere of total safety and security. A place with strong walls, so that the troubles and trifles of the rest of the galaxy simply bounce away with hardly a sound. A place with loyal troops: brave men, women, and droids who protect our lives with the very weapons and technologies that we develop.

Of course, any good castle needs a castellan, and that's how I see my role as "Special Executive": merely one servant among many, responsible for ensuring that all of the people and machines of CZ-198 have everything they need to work

together and achieve their highest potential. After all, we wouldn't want to waste the tremendous resources that we're so fortunate to command, or risk tarnishing the gleaming legacy that the Czerka brand has so flawlessly developed!

But who is the ruler of our great castle? The consumer, of course! The demands of the marketplace are our royal decrees, forever guiding and pushing us toward new and better designs. Our speeders and starships are glistening chariots, ensuring that our customers can travel safely and glamorously to any destination. And our weapons are the customers' royal bodyguards, protecting them and their interests from any possible harm.

Thus, our role is clear: we must commit ourselves, our time, and our resources to create the finest products and technologies that we can; exceptional goods fit for kings and queens, marketed and sold to every sapient being in the galaxy. Anything less would be treason!

We have our castle, CZ-198: built strong at the crossroads of technology and talent. We have our goal, noble and pure: serving our consumers with every means at our disposal. And we have our history: a tradition of success and dynamism that is unrivaled in the galactic marketplace.

We are Czerka Corporation. Together, we will seize the future!

## **CZ-198 and the State of Czerka Corporation**

*FOR INTERNAL DISTRIBUTION ONLY.*

Thank you for your time.

By now, you undoubtedly have read, seen, or heard about the recent news regarding Czerka. I am sure that rumors of every sort are being bandied about--as a matter of fact, I heard six of them just this morning--and so I am reaching out to all of you here at CZ-198 before your understandable concerns get out of hand.

Yes, it is true that big changes are ahead for the Czerka Corporation. It is also true that the Galactic Republic has made moves that would see them taking control of Czerka's assets until a pathway for reorganization can be devised and implemented.



What does this mean for you? On a day-to-day basis, it means you should go about your job as usual. As your Special Executive, I am taking every step within my power to ensure that you can remain focused on designing and manufacturing first-rate products for first-rate consumers.

You can expect to see new faces in the coming weeks. I assure you these are not your replacements, but rather the additional staff we require in order to hoist CZ-198 to the next echelon of greatness.

Together, you and I have taken a moon that was little more than a storage warehouse and built it into the cornerstone of Czerka's research and development empire. The designation CZ-198 now means something, and I intend to see that it continues to do so.

We all stand on this grand path together. We are the future of Czerka. And we are unstoppable.

Special Executive Rasmus Blys

### **HoloNet News Exclusive Interview: Baron Deathmark**

In today's HoloNet News exclusive, sports legend and renowned Huttball host Baron Deathmark has graciously agreed to an interview with chief correspondent Lamalla Rann. After a tour of Deathmark's luxurious Nar Shaddaa penthouse, the Baron sat down with Rann to discuss his incredible personal story and give us a peak into the future of gladiatorial entertainment.

LAMALLA RANN: Baron Deathmark, huge pleasure to speak with you today. You're a living legend, you have legions of adoring fans, and you smell like designer hand-stitched leatheris gloves. What is life like for Huttball's number one celebrity spokesbeing?

BARON DEATHMARK: Life is good, Lamalla! I've stabbed, burned, smashed, and shouted my way to the top, and I couldn't have done it without the support of all those amazing fans you've just mentioned. It's hard to believe a scrawny kid from the Nikto Sector could go so far!

LR: In fact, I think you can still see the Nikto Sector from one of your penthouse's five balconies, isn't that right?

BD: Of course! It's important to remember where you come from.

LR: Speaking of your penthouse—lovely place, so tastefully decorated, let me just say—there was one floor where we weren't allowed take our holocams. So mysterious! Can you tell our audience what's going on down there?

BD: That's my personal top-secret training facility, Lamalla! Three hundred and seventy-six different workout stations, from weight equipment to training dummies to automated deathtraps, all developed from my own career techniques combined with years of experience in viewing the game firsthand.

LR: But why so much secrecy? What is Baron Deathmark planning—could it be a return from retirement?

BD: Oh, no, Lamalla. I'm not heading back into the Pit—I'm heading straight into my fans' homes with Baron Deathmark's Huttball for Health Workout... of Death! Just fifty credits will buy an inside look into my training center along with an specially-designed exercise routine guaranteed to transform anyone into Rotworm or Frog-Dog material practically overnight!

LR: An incredible opportunity for Huttball hopefuls, Baron! And speaking of new opportunities, there's been a lot of talk about Giradda the Hutt's newest venture.

BD: I'm not surprised! Giradda's arenas are going to be the next big thing in team-based athletic bloodsport, let me tell you.

LR: Give us the scoop! What separates these arenas from the Huttball we all know and love?

BD: Well, of course, the core element of Huttball is the Huttball. Take that away, and what do you have? Two teams, armed to the teeth, locked in a room until someone's a winner. And I think most people would agree, that can make for some great entertainment.

There's just one problem. Huttball teams are big—it can take a while for that many people to really brutalize each other. So Giradda thought, make the teams smaller, and you get to the good stuff even faster!

LR: Insightful stuff—not to mention exciting! Giradda definitely knows his audience.

BD: He really is a Hutt of the people.

LR: Now, I'm afraid we're just about out of time, Baron. Any final words for our audience?

BD: Well, a trainer once gave me a piece of advice that's really stuck with me. "No matter what the scoreboard says, there's always time to get out there and really mangle somebody." Good advice no matter where you are in life!

LR: Words of wisdom from Baron Deathmark himself! That's it for today, folks, but be sure to check back next time, when the Baron will be giving us a VIP tour of Giradda the Hutt's new arenas!

Lamalla Rann is an award-winning journalist and author. Her most recent holobook, "Missing the Mannett Point: The Mantellian Civil War Revealed", is currently the top-selling nonfiction work of the year.

## **HoloNet News Exclusive Interview: Baron Deathmark, Part 2**

HoloNet News now presents the conclusion of an exclusive interview with legendary Huttball host Baron Deathmark. In part one, Deathmark reflected on his storied career, hinted at future plans, and took chief correspondent Lamalla Rann on a tour of his Nar Shaddaa luxury penthouse. In part two, Deathmark and Rann leave the signature skylines of Nar for exotic locales across the galaxy in order to preview Giradda the Hutt's latest gladiatorial venture: Warzone Arenas.

LAMALLA RANN: Baron, what can you tell me about the so-called "Arenas of Death"? What makes them stand out from Huttball?

BARON DEATHMARK: I'm so glad you asked that, Lamalla! A lot of folks out there assume that all Giradda's doing is taking the ball out of Huttball, and that just isn't true. That would leave nothing but a bunch of Frog-Dogs and Rotworms running over goal lines, and who wants to watch that?!

LR: I'm guessing no one?

BD: No one. Exactly! No, what Giradda's done here is remove nearly every last rule from the equation, so what you're left with is a clash between two teams of

four dedicated, merciless, tough-as-durasteel warriors duking it out until only one side's left standing!

LR: Wow. That sounds... intense. And so, looking at this arena here— Are those Galactic Trade Network terminals?

BD: They are, but they're no longer functioning. In our early game trials here at this space station, which Giradda won on a bet, we found that competitors wound up spending most of their time on the GTN shopping instead of killing!

LR: This was the first Arena of Death?

BD: Yes, the original! But since Giradda enjoys travel so much, he decided this one arena wasn't enough and started franchising across the galaxy!

LR: And that takes us to the galactic core. Why choose Corellia, of all places?

BD: Anywhere you find a great deal of turmoil, you'll also find people hungry for entertainment. The truth is this part of the planet was already being used for unlicensed combat sports. Giradda bought the area outright, put down a fence, and made it official!

LR: It must have been an inexpensive endeavor, considering the land values around here.

BD: Unless it's my paycheck, I never talk credits with Giradda. I just rile the crowd and call the shots!

LR: Here on Tatooine, now... what's so special about this moisture farm?

BD: It's an Arena of Death now—that's what's special about it to me. For Giradda, though, it's more personal. This farm was willed to him by one of his debtors, who tragically perished when a starship mysteriously crashed into his dwelling. After a brief but respectful period of mourning, Giradda turned the farm into an official arena, complete with luxurious skyboxes built into the rock face!

LR: Are these arenas you've shown me the only arenas?

BD: Not even close! These no-holds-barred centers of action are going to sweep the galaxy with their stripped-down format and immeasurable brutality! Giradda has big plans for the sport, and I'm proud to be a part of it.

LR: I can tell. Thank you for your time, Baron.

BD: No, no—thank you, Lamalla! And, on a very serious note, I'd like to thank all my fans. I wouldn't be where I am today if not for them. And I'd like to remind them that they, too, can dream big, just like I did. All they need is to take that big first step, and they can take that step by purchasing the upcoming Baron Deathmark's Huttball for Health Workout... of Death!

LR: [Laughs] I can't think of a better way to end this interview. Across the galaxy and into your world, I'm Lamalla Rann for HoloNet News. Good day to you all.

Lamalla Rann is an award-winning journalist and author. Her most recent holobook, "Missing the Mannett Point: The Mantellian Civil War Revealed", is currently the top-selling nonfiction work of the year.

## **A Record of the Dread Masters**

TRANSMISSION LOG 237890223409098184

ORIGIN: Master Gnost-Dural, Keeper of the Jedi Archives, Tython

RECIPIENT: Master Ogan-Dei, Chief Advisor, Strike Team Oricon

MESSAGE:

My old friend,

I have gathered the information you requested from the archives, though our records regarding the Dread Masters are far from complete. In particular, our knowledge of their origins is disappointingly vague, based mostly on hearsay and fragments recovered from Imperial historical logs.

Firstly, our records confirm that the Dread Masters are human, despite many rumors to the contrary. Biological scans conducted after their capture by Master Kaedan confirmed this, though their lifespans have extended well beyond the norm for that species. We do not know the extent of their longevity, nor the world (or worlds) they came from. We don't even know their true names.

The Dread Masters' goals are similarly mysterious. We know that they are no longer affiliated with the Sith Empire, despite the fact that Imperial forces are responsible for rescuing them from our prison facilities on Belsavis. That they would betray the Empire they've served for so many years is unexpected, but

not necessarily unexplainable. (I can elaborate on my theories in a future report, if requested.)

Since betraying the Empire, the Dread Masters have quickly amassed a military force of their own, which they refer to as their “Dread Host”. Our research suggests that very few members of this force are willing volunteers; most are former Republic and Imperial personnel whose minds have been irreparably dominated by the power of the Dread Masters. Efforts to question or treat captured members of the Dread Host have been entirely unsuccessful. The constant psychological manipulations of the Dread Masters have rendered their followers both completely loyal and incurably, paranoically insane.

As they gathered their armies, the Dread Masters also began to make subtle inroads within the Hutt Cartel. My information suggests that it was their influence which drove the Cartel’s former Supreme Mogul, Karagga the Unyielding, to initiate the aggressive expansion activities that ultimately resulted in his own death. The ramifications were far-reaching, perhaps even leading to the recent conflict on Makeb.

The Dread Masters further expanded their influence by briefly seizing control of the planet Denova, a major supplier of explosive munitions. Working through mercenary intermediaries, the Dread Masters seized an unknown amount of high-powered explosives, along with weapons, ground and air vehicles, and other military supplies originally stationed on the planet by the Republic.

Next, the Dread Masters set out for more exotic technologies. Forces from the Dread Host were deployed to Belsavis, where they attempted to retrieve ancient Rakata weapons that had been hidden there. Another, much smaller team managed to infiltrate the Gree Enclave and gather information and materials from some of their most complex designs. Although this team was defeated on the planet Asation, I believe we must still assume that they successfully transmitted the information they gathered, including the secrets of Gree “hypergate” technology, back to their masters.

Most recently, the Dread Masters attempted to bolster their forces by once again manipulating the shattered Hutt Cartel. A vast assembly of mercenary and pirate arms, vehicles, and personnel was gathered on Darvannis, ostensibly to vie for Cartel contracts. Instead, the Dread Master known as Styraak attempted to overwhelm and convert the mercenaries into service among the Dread Host. Fortunately, Styraak’s plans were foiled before he could fully complete them, and

Styrak himself was killed—the first palpable blow struck against the Dread Masters since their escape.

Since that time, the remaining five Dread Masters—Brontes, Tyrans, Calphayus, Bestia, and Raptus—have remained in hiding. Despite the loss of Styrak and other setbacks, we know for a fact that the Dread Masters still have a vast army of fanatical soldiers at their command, as well as a collection of powerful and ancient technologies that lie well outside of our scientific understanding. Furthermore, the Dread Masters' ability to induce widespread terror, paranoia, and hallucinations may not have been affected by Styrak's death, and I have found nothing in my studies that would suggest any foolproof defense against their power, either for you or your forces.

The task ahead of you will no doubt present one of the greatest challenges anyone in our order has faced. Please let me know if I can provide any additional information to aid you.

May the Force be with you.

END MESSAGE

## **The Search for Oricon**

LOG FILE: XR7783459098224-AFR-R

ACCESS LEVEL: 27V Restricted

OPERATIVE: BALKAR, J

The poor kid actually pulled it off. Oricon.

We had an army of slicers working back-to-back shifts for months, fired probe droids at every Outer Rim rock big enough to seat six, and tried to question every nutjob the Dread Masters ever left behind on an op. Didn't even get a hint. But throw some grinning recruit into the deepest end of the most psychotic pool in the galaxy, and sure enough, jackpot!

When they brought him in, I thought they'd lost their minds. I think I even asked if they had a permission doc from his mom, which somehow seemed more inappropriate to them than hiring a child to infiltrate the Dread Host. They swore he'd seen a full tour on Corellia and run cover on some Belsavis supply runs. He'd passed all the psych tests, resisted every mind-altering device and chemical they

could find. Plenty of qualifications. And what's more, they said he was a little bit Force-sensitive. The perfect candidate, apparently.

I asked how they could even tell something like that. They said they had people. News to me.

I ran the kid through the usual field tests, just like they asked. Had him bug someone at the Imp embassy on Nar Shaddaa, got him to fake his way in with the Justicars for a week, no problems. Kid even got a Senator to give him his signature, security key, and week's schedule without even flashing a fake ID.

When it was done, and they asked how he did, I thought about lying. It still didn't sit right with me, but he'd aced everything I threw at him, so that's what I told them. I'm sure I made another crack about his age, too, but I don't remember it so it must not have been that great. I know they didn't laugh, but they never do, so that was that and I moved on to the next job.

I ran another couple of candidates through the field tests. Spent a few weeks charming an heiress on Kuat who'd been making a lot of undocumented flights, but there was nothing there. Checked up on someone in SpecForce, took care of some other personal stuff. I don't even remember what I was doing when they called me back in, but whatever it was, it didn't get done.

The kid had made it. They wouldn't tell me where he'd gone to get "recruited", or how long he'd been running with those messed up freaks before he came back. He'd hijacked a Dread Host ship and flown it back, just like they planned, but he'd also lost his blasted mind, which for some reason they *hadn't* planned. He was sitting alone in their hangar with a big nasty blade and a smile on his face and not a single word for anyone, so they were hoping I might be able to get him to open up. Says right there in my profile how charming I am, and we'd been week-long friends a few months back, so what could go wrong?

I never got to ask them how things went from bad to nightmarish; he'd spread pieces of them all over the place by the time I got there. The guards were dead, too, but just the normal, murdered kind of dead. I guess they didn't merit the special treatment, even though they must've shot the kid five times apiece. He was just standing there, full of holes, smiling that same shiny kid smile he had when they first brought him in. It didn't look like he had more than five minutes left to breathe, but since it didn't look like it would take him more than five milliseconds to cut me to shreds, I kept my weapon on him all the same.



It took him a while to even notice me. When he did, he asked if I was proud of him. I told him I'd seen cleaner knife work from broken cooking droids.

I don't always say the right thing.

The fight wasn't much of one. After about two shots I was too busy running and firing over my shoulder to do anything particularly heroic. When the kid finally went down, I checked my chrono; five minutes had been a pretty good estimate. Once I made sure he was really, definitely out of the game, I went back to the hangar.

The navicomputer was no help, but the ship wasn't exactly the latest and greatest when it comes to stealth tech, so I took a few scans and met with a friend of mine, Niall. I had him cross-check the scans with observation logs from all of those probes we'd launched, and after a few hours and a lot of math I didn't care to understand, he traced the ship's trail back to the start and handed me the coordinates for Oricon. "Jackpot!" he said.

Right. Tell that to the people we're going to have to send there next.

### **HoloNet News Exclusive Interview: Baron Deathmark**

In yet another HoloNet News exclusive, chief correspondent Lamalla Rann sits down once again with sports icon and renowned Huttball host Baron Deathmark, who discusses the newly announced Arena of Death on the planet Makeb and gives fans a glimpse of the carnage they can expect in this new setting.

LAMALLA RANN: Baron Deathmark, thank you for joining us one more time. Since the last time we spoke, the Arenas of Death have really taken off – they're a huge hit among blood sport aficionados. How has that gone over with your boss, Giradda the Hutt?

BARON DEATHMARK: I'm sure it's no surprise, Lamalla – Giradda has been one happy Hutt. With all of the extra credits coming in, he's been able to add three more feasts to his daily routine!

LR: That brings him up to fourteen, doesn't it? Giradda must have a very busy schedule!

BD: Not to mention his cooks!

LR: Let's get straight to it: your newest Arena is located on the planet Makeb. That's a choice that's left many of our viewers surprised, given the planet's recent geological instabilities – why choose it for your next locale?

BD: Well, I'm pretty sure those groundquake stories have been exaggerated a bit, but it's definitely true that Makeb's been through a tough time. You know, Giradda just sees that as an opportunity – the evacuations have left us plenty of empty space, and high-profile sporting events are a great way to rejuvenate the local economy. We think it's important that our Arenas of Death give a little something back, after all.

LR: A charitable goal we can all get behind! Do you think you can give me a tour?

BD: You bet, Lamalla – Giradda has even offered up his personal viewing barge for the ride!

LR: So you and Giradda will be viewing all of the action from here?

BD: Yep. Even after all these years, Giradda loves to get in for a personal view of the action.

LR: Tell me about the force fields.

BD: Well, when we did our first test runs, viewers got tired of watching the players falling off the sides of all those cliffs. It just gets a little same-old, same-old, you know? So we threw in the force fields to make sure every kill you see is hands-on and one of a kind!

LR: You know your audience! Now, can you tell me anything about those glowing canisters I'm seeing spread around?

BD: I'm glad you asked! I've seen a few suspicious postings out there saying this is all just a front for us to mine more of Makeb's natural resources and sneak them out in canisters like those. It's a load of bunk, Lamalla! They're just props we threw in to add a bit more atmosphere – nothing more.

LR: Straight from the source, people! This looks like it's sure to be home to even more of the exciting action that Arena fans have come to enjoy so much, Baron. Let's wrap up with one last question: a lot of fans are worried that all of this Arena action is overshadowing their first love, Huttball. How do you respond to that?

BD: Huttball fans have nothing to worry about, Lamalla! We're going to be ratcheting the game up to the next level very soon!

LR: Any hints for what we can expect?

BD: If you want to watch in person, buy a breath mask with whatever it is you like to breathe – you're gonna need it!

LR: A thrilling hint at things to come! That's all we have time for today, folks. Big thanks to our return guest, Baron Deathmark. Across the galaxy and into your world, I'm Lamalla Rann for Holonet News!

LAMALLA RANN IS AN AWARD-WINNING JOURNALIST AND AUTHOR. HER NEWEST RELEASE, "THE SOLDIER, THE SCOUNDREL, AND THE STARS" HAS ALREADY BEEN INCLUDED ON MANY REVIEWERS' ANNUAL MUST-READ LISTS.

#### **IMPERIAL EDICT GR-1NC4**

Immediate Notice and Compliance Demanded.

It has come to the Empire's attention that dissident elements engaging in a tawdry and potentially dangerous seasonal event are planning to infect Imperial space with their insipid notions. This so-called "Life Day" encourages activities unbecoming of an Imperial citizen, including but not limited to:

- Dancing in inclement weather
- Singing unpatriotic carols
- Nonviolent physical contact with Wookiees

This disgraceful menace of a "holiday", during which time you are expected to comply fully with this edict, will last approximately two weeks on the Galactic Standard Calendar.\*

The alleged ringmaster of these activities—dubbed the "Master of Ceremonies"—has somehow obtained an official license to peddle his "holiday cheer" in the Galactic Trade Market sector of Vaiken Spacedock. While those responsible for this error in licensing have been punished to the fullest extent of Imperial law, the sale of Life Day goods will proceed. However, these items are under review under Section 53-T of Imperial law and their purchase may constitute an official Contraband Violation:

## **EMERGENCY ALERT: Rakghoul Plague Outbreak on Alderaan – AVOID ALDERAAN!**

The Hyland Organization for Rakghoul Neutralization (T.H.O.R.N.) has issued an official level-2 emergency alert concerning an outbreak of the Rakghoul plague on Alderaan. Wide-spread infections have been reported near both House Organa and House Thul, while scattered reports of infection traceable to Alderaan are now flooding in from across the galaxy. Quarantines have been put in place to restrict traffic of the plague off-world, but exceptions will be made for individuals with priority clearance.

T.H.O.R.N. is recruiting qualified volunteer emergency responders to travel to affected areas to combat the spread of the plague (Levels 25+ Recommended). More information about the outbreak can be found by checking the News Terminals on the Fleet.

T.H.O.R.N. wishes to remind you that plague symptoms can be treated if they are identified in the early stages of infection. Whether or not you have travel plans, please consult your nearest trusted medical supply droid and get vaccinated!

## **Since KOTOR: Manaan**

Shuuru // Personal Datalog

It is not a foolish endeavor to try and anticipate one's future path, or even the path of an entire civilization. But it can be. If we do not first take stock of that which lies in our wake, we can never truly know how to negotiate the currents ahead. It is with this concern in mind that I indulge in this analysis of the ebb and flow of my dear home, Manaan.

For a long time--longer than we have records for--the Infinite Empire ruled our world. They enslaved us until their eventual fall, and we Selkath vowed we would never be placed in servitude again. As offworld explorers eventually arrived on our world, they came to see our kolto as a vital resource in their contest for dominion over the galaxy. We in turn came to see how valuable kolto could be. Due to our history, however, we also saw how it could become a detriment.

Therefore, my ancestors wisely vowed to remain neutral in the galactic fray. They even went so far as to allow both the Galactic Republic and the Sith Empire to establish embassies on our surface metropolis, Ahto City. While their truce on our world was tense, the importance of kolto to their efforts gave them no choice but to conduct themselves in a lawful manner.

At least, that was what we believed.

A visit from a Jedi named Revan changed everything. He exposed a terrible truth--that the Sith were abducting and manipulating our youth, indoctrinating them into the ways of the dark side of the Force. This revelation did not sit well with my ancestors, and the resulting tensions eventually sparked an uprising led by one of those abducted children, Shasa--by this point a powerful Force practitioner in her own right.

The Sith were driven from Ahto City, their embassy razed. We continued our relations with the Republic, but warily so, ever mindful of the pattern of transgressions visited upon us by offworlders. More and more, we Selkath turned to our Force-wielding Order of Shasa--so named for the brave architect of the Sith's ouster--for guidance. Taking after the pragmatic stance of their namesake, the order sought the abolishment of the Republic embassy from Ahto City, thereby isolating Manaan from the ongoing turbulence beyond its waters.

Ultimately, the action was unnecessary. Like how the flutter of a single fin is said to culminate in a great wave, it seemed as though our actions caused the Empire to crash and disperse. Tensions finally abated. For a time we Selkath prospered. Many of our kind even ventured out into the great sea of stars in search of new lives and opportunities.

We did not know it then, but like the fabled Binexan Shark the Sith Empire rose up from the black depths in a stronger, bolder form. When this resurgent Empire demanded our allegiance, my ancestors attempted to extend the same offer of neutrality they had found acceptable in the past. We only served to anger them. They bombarded our world from space, sinking nearly every last surface structure, Ahto City included.

With their inaction in our time of need, the Republic delivered the finishing blow--and this without having fired a single shot. Betrayed and embittered, we retreated to the depths, no longer willing to associate with any offworlders in

any way. To us, they were all slavers. Abductors of our children. Calm-water friends at best.

Those years are said by many to be the greatest in Selkath history. Our own culture and traditions thrived. There was little strife. In our independence from the rest of the galaxy, we were together. But many secretly yearned for the ways and means the offworlders' presence brought, and we came to find ourselves in economic distress. After a great deal of debate it was finally decided that, despite the lessons our past afforded us, our absence from the galactic stage was not to be permanent.

As our first new surface structure in many years, the Mercantile Plaza opened with strict rules as to who was given landing privileges. At first, this meant only special ambassadors from Republic-aligned worlds were allowed to visit. By this time I was heavily involved in shaping extra-planetary policy, and I pressed to extend an invitation to the Sith. I had been dissatisfied with the Republic's inaction in our time of need and did not wish to invite a second bombardment from their enemies.

In the time since once again offering the Empire a kolto trade agreement and a presence on Manaan, the Republic has proven itself a more assertive and competent ally than in the past. I can earnestly say they have won me over. That does not mean, however, that we should renege on our deal with the Empire. It serves us well to strike a balance. After all, what guarantees do we have that either side would remain at arm's length if left unchecked?

The answer to such a question lies in the churn of our wake.

### **Lana Beniko's Journal: Darth Arkous**

Observation of my subject continues. It's entirely business as usual. Oversight, consultations, strategy discussions. A good deal of his time is spent behind closed doors without my presence. It's always been that way with us, but it used to be I had no reason to question the reason for his privacy.

Working with him from day to day as if nothing's amiss has not been easy. When I look him in the eye and ask him a question and know that he's lying to me, it is difficult to believe that this is the same man who recruited me into his world. How far back does the deception go?

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My first impression of Darth Arkous was that of a vain and pompous statesman. I recall not being all that impressed with him, but his offer to act in an advisory role for the military was too promising an opportunity to pass up. This was especially true as my first exposure to Arkous's work would involve overseeing the invasion of Talay, the site of a major Republic outpost and communications hub.

Despite the self-assured manner in which he carried on about his plan, I had to admit it was a clever initiative that would minimize resistance while maximizing confusion amongst the planet's populace. What not even Arkous had accounted for, however, was that the Republic was executing a plot of its own that would threaten to place his offensive in jeopardy.

An SIS team was already aboard Arkous's ship when we departed from Dromund Kaas. I was meditating, setting my passions free to roil and reach. Spies are taught to withstand the persuasive powers of the Force, to protect their minds from harm. While this sort of discipline is useful against direct confrontation from someone like myself, it tends to be a fairly useless means of mental camouflage. Point of fact, it acts as a virtual beacon to any Sith familiar with the telltale signs of someone walling off their thoughts.

I could sense that the enemy assets--four of them--were apart from one another, unable to communicate for fear of discovery. I sought out the one nearest to me and, after some initial resistance, convinced him to tell me everything. They were to slice whatever data they could and then remotely detonate an explosive device on our craft from the safety of an escape pod. I had been concerned the spies were sent to subvert the Talay initiative, but it was clear they knew nothing of it. Not yet, at least. They still had a reasonable chance of revealing our plan to their superiors, and an even better chance of killing us all.

I reached out to Arkous, warning him of the danger. Separate but working together we silently stalked and eliminated two more. I then came upon the final SIS agent, who was busy priming the explosive device within the belly of the ship. I thought I had the drop on her, but she had surgical enhancements. Inhumanly alert and impossibly fast. I struck and missed and by the time I recovered she was already on her way to the escape pods.

With the need for subterfuge over, I sounded the alarm. As I worked to defuse the bomb the crew tried their best to stop the agent, but they failed. She had already launched the escape pod. I gave word to the bridge to jam all

communications and then let Darth Arkous decide whether to pull her in via tractor beam or obliterate her with our cannons. That was when she detonated a secondary device inside the ship's electrical hub.

We had no comms. No tractor beams. No weapons. And we had no idea what she might have learned of our initiative, and there was nothing we could do about it. Even the Force couldn't stop her from broadcasting the data if she wanted to. I watched the pod depart, wishing I had done more, when I witnessed something truly astounding.

The pod slowed as a figure rocketed from our ship. It was Darth Arkous, outfitted for space. He slammed against the pod and plunged his lightsaber into it. That was enough to compromise the pod's integrity. Its interior became the agent's tomb.

Darth Arkous went above and beyond to preserve the Empire's edge against the Republic. He may have played the self-important bureaucrat, but by his actions he was undoubtedly a selfless and devoted patriot. From that moment forward, I was certain I had made the right choice in becoming his advisor.

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My subject recently made arrangements to pilot a shuttle to Onderon. He claimed he must negotiate a sensitive matter with the planet's temperamental queen regarding troop commitments. That would be all well and good if he was actually going to Onderon.

He has arrived on Manaan instead. Without the proper clearance codes I find myself unable to land, but I must see this through, if only to prove that he's simply engaged in something petty or embarrassing. Unfortunately, I don't think I'll prove any such thing. I feel with every fiber of my being that this is something more.

Something terrible.

### **Surface Details**

"Next."

Varko gave the hydro-dispenser on his desk a quick tap, then rubbed the fluids into the skin of his hands. He'd heard it could take a few weeks to get used to



spending so much time out of the water. Adjusting to surface work was tougher than he'd imagined, but Varko was determined to power through.

When he looked up, an offworlder had arrived at his desk, identification in hand. A human. Varko was still getting the hang of telling their genders apart; he was fairly sure this was a male. Small cybernetic implants dotted the tan skin of his face. The fur on top of his head was short and spiked up – Varko had seen a few humans who'd shaved off their fur patches, and couldn't understand why they didn't all do so. Much less ugly that way. "Welcome to Mana'an. Identification, please."

The human handed over his credentials. "Thank you. You speak Basic very well."

Varko assessed whether he was being complimentary or condescending; the human was showing his bony little teeth, a sign of happiness in their species, so Varko took his words as sincere. "I studied for many years, thank you. Tev Fith, is it?"

"Tev Fith, that's me. Most people don't say it right." His teeth were showing again; apparently this human was easily impressed.

"You travel often, then?" The computer revealed him to be a Republic citizen, and listed several other planets he'd visited.

"I do, I do... my first time here, though. That's probably true for most of your visitors, huh?"

"It is, yes." The customs center had opened along with the rest of the Mercantile Plaza, the first surface structure opened to offworld visitors in decades. "What is the purpose of your visit?"

"Hoping to spend most of my time out on the water, but I guess my boss expects me to do a bit of work, too." When Varko didn't say anything, he continued, "I do research. Air and water samples, sensor scans, that kind of stuff."

"For what purpose?"

"Honestly, I didn't read the contract too closely. Think it's for a biotech firm. Probably looking to sell their products here, want to make sure the climate is hospitable. I can get the details if I need a permit or something."

“Only if you intend to travel more than two hundred meters distance or fifty meters depth from this platform. The Order doesn’t allow offworld visitors beyond that without special clearance.”

“Oh, you know, I think my boss might have put in the request when he got here. Maybe you spoke to him – big guy, shaved head?”

The human without fur! Varko knew he’d seen one recently, and nodded confirmation as he’d learned humans do. “Yes, two days ago. One of the largest offworlders I’ve met.”

More teeth. “Could you check and see if he put in a request for my permit while he was at it?”

Varko brought up the records on his computer, found the larger human’s image. “Yes, he entered a request for two permits to allow deep subsurface travel, starting tomorrow.” Varko paused when he saw the record for the second person. “The second permit is for someone else entirely, however.”

Fith scrunched his face muscles. Confusion? “Huh. Must not have been my boss after all. Don’t worry about it.”

“Are you sure? Perhaps the records were entered incorrectly.” Varko hid his files, displaying only the larger human’s face as he turned the screen toward Fith. “Is that your employer?”

Fith looked at the screen only briefly. “Nope, I don’t work for that guy. Boss must have talked with a different customs agent.”

Varko nodded again. “Yes, that must be it. Would you like to begin your own permit request?”

The human’s head twisted gently, side to side. “No, I’m sure if I needed one, my boss would’ve put in the request himself. I’ll just head for my room and get in touch with him from there.”

Varko handed Fith’s credentials back to him. “Have a pleasant stay, Master Fith.”

“Thanks!” Another flash of teeth as he walked away.

Varko closed out Fith’s computer file and reached for the hydro-dispenser again. “Next.”

\*\*\*

The rest of the day passed smoothly. As Varko's shift was about to end, another human arrived at Varko's desk. This one appeared to be female, with even more head fur than the male and paler skin. "Welcome to Manaan. Identification, please."

She did not show her teeth. "You don't need to see my identification."

Varko agreed enthusiastically.

"A male Pureblood Sith arrived here two days ago. You'd like to tell me where he is."

Varko was excited to help. He loaded the file on his computer and told her about everything on record, including the Sith's subsurface travel permit and that of his companion –the large, furless human Varko had mistakenly identified earlier.

"Thank you. Now that your work is done here, it's time you got home, isn't it? Such a boring and forgettable day, I'm sure."

Varko logged out of the computer and got to his feet as she walked away. When he stepped through the door to his apartment, his head suddenly felt strange. He decided he'd just spent too long out of the water, rubbed his head and changed to go for a swim. Selkath belonged in the water, free to soar among the currents; not spending countless hours sitting behind a desk. By the time he was ready, he found he couldn't recall even one interesting thing happening all day.

Such a boring and forgettable day.

**3653bby**

### **The Old Republic : The Third Lesson**

A haze of smoke hung in the air, the black residuum of the Imperial fleet's pre-landing bombardment of Alderaan. Rage burned in Malgus, its seed grown from the word he kept hearing over Imperial communication channels: Retreat.

The Empire had lost Alderaan. Hours before Malgus had walked its surface as a conqueror, but now...

Now signal fires dotted its surface, rallying points for the Republic forces.

A counterattack was coming. Reports indicated a Republic fleet en route to Alderaan.

Retreat.

Retreat.

He clenched his fists so hard it made his fingers ache. His breathing sounded like a rasp over wood. His skin stung from burns. A Republic commando had exploded a grenade in his face, and combat with a Jedi witch had damaged his lungs. Lacerations and contusions made a grim mosaic on his flesh.

But he felt no pain. He felt only anger.

Hate.

A sense of frustration that made him want to shout.

His personal shuttle roared low over the scorched landscape. Below him, buildings and bodies smoldered in the ruins of an Alderaani town. Around him, Imperial ships prowled the sky, flying escort. He tried to unknot his fists, failed. He wanted...

The presence of a light-side Force user bumped up against his Force sensitivity, a sudden flare in his perception. He took down and out the viewport. He saw nothing but charred ruins, rubble buildings, burnt out vehicles. He pinched the comlink he wore.

"Turn us around. "

"My lord?" asked his pilot.

"Come about, cut speed to one quarter, and reduce altitude by one hundred meters. "

"Yes, my lord. "

As the shuttle wheeled around and slowed, Malgus overrode the safeties and lowered the landing ramp. Wind whipped into the cabin, carrying the smell of a charred planet, a planet Malgus had intended to kill, but instead had only wounded.

Someone had to pay for that.

He took the hilt of his lightsaber in hand and sank into the Force. The burned-out buildings below stuck out of the scorched earth like rotted teeth, crooked and black.

"Slower, " he said to the pilot.

He reached out through the Force, probing for the light-side presence he had felt.

At first there was nothing, and he wondered if he had been mistaken, or if the light-side user had perceived Malgus and suppressed his power. But then...

There.

He felt it as an irritation behind his eyes, an itch only violence could scratch. He shed his cloak and stepped to the edge of the landing ramp. The wind pulled at him. Anger swelled in him, buoyed him up. The Force anchored him in place. He pinched his comlink again.

"Hover above the ruins until I return. "

"Return, my lord? Where are you going? You're seriously wounded. "

Malgus deactivated the comlink and leapt off the ramp into the open air. He ignited his blade as the ground rushed up to meet him. Using the Force to cushion the impact, he hit the ground in a crouch.

He stood in the center of a street pockmarked with craters and littered with broken glass and overturned speeders. An aircar burned 10 meters from him, vomiting gouts of black smoke into the sky. Somewhere, a wind bell chimed furiously in the gusts.

"I'm here, Jedi!" Malgus shouted, his voice booming over the ruins.

Behind him, he heard the hum of an activating lightsaber, then another.

He turned to see a male Zabrak, a Jedi, emerge from one of the burned-out buildings that lined the street. The blue line of a lightsaber glowed in each of his hands. He studied Malgus sidelong.

"Malgus, " the Jedi said.

Malgus did not know the Jedi's name and he did not care. The Zabrak was merely the focus of his anger, a convenient target for his rage.

Malgus fell into the Force, roared, and bounded down the street, his anger lending him speed.

The Jedi held his ground. At twenty meters, the Jedi raised his lightsabers aloft to either side and drew them both down with a flourish.

Too late the rumble of the falling buildings penetrated the haze of Malgus's anger. An avalanche of duracrete and transparisteel crashed down on him from either side of the street...

\* \* \*

The creases on his father's Imperial uniform looked sharp enough to cut meat, but his tone was as soft as the belly that overflowed his trousers.

"Come with me, Veradun. "

Veradun followed his father to the enormous menagerie they kept on the grounds of the family's estate. His father, a biologist in the Imperial Science Corps, collected animals from countless worlds. The family had their own private zoo, financed by the Empire. Veradun had helped tend the creatures since he'd been a small boy.

Shrieks, chitters, howls, and a pungent animal stink greeted their entrance. His father's voice knifed through the noise.

"You know why I enjoy these animals so much?"

Veradun shook his head. He saw himself reflected in the lenses of his father's eyeglasses.

"Because we can learn from them."

"Learn what?"

His father smiled cryptically. "Come on."

Father put a hand on his shoulder and steered him through the maze of habitats, cages, and tanks, until they reached the transparisteel cube of the kouhun tank. A thick layer of sand, dotted with a few loose rocks and some loose fur, was all that was visible. The segmented arthropod, its body as long as Veradun's arm, lay hidden somewhere underneath the sand of the tank.

Veradun walked around the tank, trying to spot any sign of the kouhun. Nothing.

Meanwhile, his father lifted a feeder rat from a nearby cage and held it over the kouhoun's tank.

"I fed it earlier," Veradun said.

"I know."

His father dropped the rat into the tank and it froze the moment it hit the sand. It sniffed the air, whiskers twitching.

The sand near it bulged.

The rat squealed with fear but before it could move, the kouhoun erupted from the sand under it, seized the rodent in its scissor-like mandibles, and bit it in half. Blood spilled, painting the sand red.

The kouhon crawled fully from the sand, its head all mandibles and dead black eyes. Dozens of pairs of legs propelled its segmented body over the bloody bits of the rat. But it did not eat, and after a moment it burrowed back into the sand, leaving the rat's carcass unmolested.

"Why do you think it killed the rat?" his father asked. "It was not hungry. As you said, you fed it not long ago."

"Instinct," Veradun said. "It's a savage creature."

"Good, Veradun. Good. Indeed, the kouhon kills for no reason. Does that make sense to you?"

"No, but...it's an animal."

His father kneeled to look Veradun in the face. "Right. And you're not. The kouhon teaches us that senseless savagery is the province of animals, not men. Savagery is useful only if it's controlled and put in service to an end. Do you understand?"

Veradun considered, nodded.

"The end is everything," his father said.

\* \* \*

Malgus stood in a pocket under a mountain of rubble, legs bent, the power from his upraised hands preventing several tons of duracrete and steel from crushing him. Dust made his already troubled breathing more difficult. He coughed as the words of his father echoed in his mind.

He'd been sloppy, so lost in his need for revenge that he'd failed to properly evaluate the Jedi's power. He'd surrendered his reason to bloodlust. But no more. With an effort of will, he contained his anger, controlled it, made it a whetstone against which he sharpened his power. Using the Force, he blew the rubble up and away from him. It fell with a crash into the adjacent buildings. A Force-augmented leap carried him out and over the heap. The Jedi's eyes widened as Malgus hit the street. Malgus sneered and charged.

He closed the distance between them rapidly. The red line of Malgus's lightsaber moved so quickly it blurred into a red smear. The Jedi parried again and again, the sizzle of blade on blade resounding through the ruins. Malgus's onslaught - a blizzard of slashes, cuts, and stabs - allowed the Jedi no room for a counterattack. The Jedi retreated before the offensive, desperately intercepting Malgus's blows.



Malgus could have ended the Jedi in any of several ways, but he needed the satisfaction of a lightsaber kill.

\* \* \*

"This is my favorite," his father said.

"The viirsun?"

Veradun had always found the avian boring. A small ground bird with drab, brown and black feathers, it did little of interest other than care for its offspring, a male that was soon to leave the nest.

"Not the viirsun, no," his father said.

"Then what?"

The viirsun's habitat - native plants, a single tree, a few rocks - was built behind a transparisteel wall. As they watched, the mother regurgitated some partially digested insects into the mouth of her nearly grown offspring. Veradun had seen the same thing a hundred times, but his father watched intently, as if he'd never seen it before.

"What are you looking at?" Veradun asked. He saw nothing unusual.

"Watch."

After devouring the insects, the offspring stood and strutted about the habitat, testing its legs. The mother watched, preening her feathers. In time, the offspring returned to the mother, stood over her, and began pecking at her with its beak. At first Veradun thought it wanted more food, but the pecking became more and more violent. Wings flapped, feathers flew. The mother attempted retreat but the offspring pursued, seized her neck in his beak and shook violently, once, twice. The offspring dropped her to the ground and began to feed.

Veradun had never seen anything like it.

"The offspring isn't a viirsun," his father explained. "It's a mimnil. In its immature state, it looks like a juvenile viirsun. It kills the original offspring and replaces

them. When it's ready to molt, it attacks its adoptive mother. I've been watching this one for a while.

A mimnil. Veradun had never suspected.

"I...still don't understand."

"Often things that pretend weakness await only the right moment to show strength. Do you understand, now?"

Veradun considered, nodded.

You must trust no one," his father said. "Least of all those who appear weak."

\* \* \*

Malgus's lightsaber traced glittering red arcs through the air. He spun, slashed, stabbed, pushing the Jedi backwards. But always the Jedi parried. He seemed to be biding his time.

He was baiting him, Malgus realized. Feigning weakness.

Malgus relented in his attack, backed off a few steps, and reached out through the Force. Immediately he felt the faint, intentionally suppressed signature of another light-side user to his right. The Jedi's ally was hidden in the rubble, moving closer.

Malgus loosed a furious series of overhand strikes that forced the Zabrak to retreat rapidly. Sidestepping a stab from the Jedi, Malgus rode his motion into a Force-augmented spinning side kick that hit the Jedi in the ribs and sent him cartwheeling into the wall of nearby building. At the same time, he reached out with the Force for the hidden light-side user, brushed aside the resistance he felt, and pulled the Jedi out of hiding.

A human male in his twenties rose up out of ruins, dangling like a fish on the hook of Malgus's power. His legs kicked futilely; the green blade of his lightsaber cut at empty air; he gagged as Malgus's power squeezed shut his throat.

"Vorin!" shouted the Zabrak.

"So much for your ambush," Malgus said, and closed his fist, crushing Vorin's windpipe. He let the body fall to the charred earth. A flash of anger, quickly suppressed, shot from the Zabrak as he bounded over the rubble at Malgus. Malgus watched him come, his red blade held slack at his side.

At 10 meters, Malgus extended his free hand and loosed veins of blue Force lightning. They struck the charging Jedi: swept through his defenses, swirled around him, and began to burn flesh.

Shouting with pain, the Jedi leaned forward into the lightning - teeth bare, blue blades held before him - and staggered toward Malgus. Despite his burns, he came onward. One step, another, another, but he was failing, wilting in the heat of the lightning. Malgus channeled more power and the Jedi fell to his knees, screaming. The lightning spiraled around the Zabrak, blasting dark holes in his body. The lightsabers fell from his hands and he writhed in agony, screaming his pain into the sky.

Malgus ended his attack. The Jedi, ruined, fell to the ground and rolled over onto his back. His breathing sounded worse than Malgus's.

Malgus strode to his side and stood over him.

He found that he admired the Jedi's mettle.

He deactivated his lightsaber.

\* \*

After watching the mimnil devour the viirsun, his father had taken him to a new cage that must have been a recent addition to the zoo, for Veradun had never noticed it before. A tarp covered it, concealing the contents.

"What's in it?" Veradun asked.

His father looked somber. "The third lesson."

Veradun's gaze went from his father, to the cage, and back to his father.

"I think you'll be a great warrior, Veradun," his father said. "A tremendous asset to the Empire."

Veradun heard the sadness in the words but did not understand them.

"Your instructors tell me they've seen few with your potential in the Force."

"I'm honored by their praise."

His father smiled distantly. "A shuttle arrives for you tomorrow, to take you to the academy on Dromund Kaas. I want you to know that I'm proud of you. Always remember that."

"I will. And I'm doubly honored by your praise, father."

His father kneeled, embraced him, stood, and walked away.

"Where are you going?" Veradun called. "What about the third lesson?"

"Look in the cage," his father said. "Perhaps you'll figure it out yourself."

Veradun watched his father go, then turned and unveiled the contents of the cage the way he might unveil a secret - slowly, carefully, and with a sense of trepidation. He let the tarp fall to the ground. The cage was entirely empty. For a moment he wondered if his father had made a mistake.

But his father never made mistakes. He stared at the empty cage for a long while, considering. Finally, he thought he understood.

\* \* \*

The Jedi, his face twisted with pain, stared up at Malgus. One of the horns on his head had cracked from the heat of the Force lightning. The Jedi's eyes went to the deactivated lightsaber in Malgus's fist and he cocked his head.

Malgus read the question in his eyes. Mercy from a Sith? Malgus smiled. He stepped forward, activated his blade, and stabbed the Jedi through the chest. "Sleep," he said.

The Jedi's eyes held the question for the few moments it took for them to go vacant. Malgus stood, deactivated his blade, inhaled, and walked away. The question in the Jedi's eyes was one he had asked himself countless times, the

one his father had tried to help him answer those many years earlier. The answer had never fully satisfied him, but he supposed that was the point.

Sometimes there was just an empty cage.

**3642 bby**

### **The Last Battle Of Colonel Jace Malcom**

T-MINUS SEVEN HOURS.

The dying man's armor dripped with sweat in the fog, beads of moisture—not water, never water on this planet—forming on the white plastoid chestplate and dripping onto the ground. The dying man himself was propped against a rock, and Sergeant Immel crouched above him as she fumbled to resecure his helmet. "He's out, Colonel," she said. "Autodoc pegs him at critical."

Jace Malcom watched the horizon. Through his helmet's display filters, the fog seemed to dissolve before the yellow sky and rocky cliffs, then snapped back into place as the filter tech gave up with an electronic shrug. No further enemy presence. At least, nothing obvious.

"Your call," Jace said. "His tracer functional?"

"It works. What about vultures?"

"If the Empire has time to send vultures, it means we failed the mission."

Not true, of course. The black-suited troopers could flock to the battlefield at any time—death's own heralds, following med tracers to find their victims. But Immel knew the odds, so Jace could afford the lie.

"Why me?" Immel asked.

"Special Forces is here to advise, and I'm glad to be an extra gun. But in the field, the game's yours."

"You're lowlife scum, Colonel Malcom."

“SpecForce is nothing but.”

Jace watched Immel. Her armored shoulders rose and fell as she took a long breath, then, silent, leaned over her dying comrade and thumbed a device on his belt. Her voice crackled through Jace’s helmet comlink a moment later.

“All teams, we’re pressing on.”

Immel plucked her rifle out of the dust and started checking its readouts. Jace knelt beside the dying man and placed a hand on his shoulder.

“Corporal Amden vor Keioidian. You did the Republic proud. You did all of us proud. And we’ll be back for you.”

Jace stood, nodded to Immel, and they slunk off together into the fog, rifles cradled close. Immel didn’t look back, and Jace smiled bitterly, feeling the expression blunted by the scars on his face. She’d made the right call. She might end up a decent leader after all.

Then again, he thought, she’d better. The troops were going to need someone to look up to, and he didn’t have much time left.

T-MINUS FOUR HOURS.

The battlefield narrowed to a series of canyons, channeling the fog like a riverbed. Kalandis Seven’s gravity—low enough to make stone-tossing a sport at base, high enough to ensure that a fall was still painful—made the march easier, but no less tedious.

Breaking the long silence came static-distorted cheering over Jace’s comlink. Children shrieked and fireworks popped, each accompanied by a blast of white noise. In one motion, not breaking stride as they traversed the barren landscape, Jace and Immel lowered the volume level on their helmet comms.

The propaganda broadcast overrode all channels every hour, blared by Republic Strategic Information Service agents in orbit. This time, it was another news

report on the Empire's withdrawal from Corellia and the Core Worlds. A genuine, unadulterated victory for the Republic, but one very far away from the Kalandis system, and not the first apparent victory Jace had seen in his career.

It was forty years now, he thought—kept thinking, every day at different times, when some private showed off her first scar in the mess hall or while reviewing specs for the hundredth variation of some starfighter—forty years since the Sith Empire had come to conquer the galaxy, and he'd been fighting ever since.

He supposed he wouldn't be fighting much longer.

Immel's voice cut through commentary on the Supreme Chancellor's latest speech. "Target in sight."

They had emerged from the narrow mouth of a canyon onto a cracked plain, where the silhouettes of dark spires stretched skyward behind the fog. "We've reached the spaceport," Immel continued, adjusting her comlink. "All teams, report in."

Jace listened to the crackling voices speak up, one

by one, as he unslung a satchel and checked the contents. He knew the soldiers' names (Zenhai, Kayle, Min-Reva), had met most of them (Eron collected antique music recordings; Camur had a caf allergy), had even hand-selected a few for this mission (Yennir of the Green saw through fog like glass). They were young and stupid and brave, and he could think of worse men and women to serve with.

"Ready to go?" Immel asked.

Jace nodded and tossed Immel the satchel. "Beacons charged and ready. Plant them on the targets and the fog won't matter—our fighter wing will know exactly where to drop the payload."

"Assuming the pilots aren't making out with their droids back at base. You done this before?"

"Bomb a spaceport? More times than I can count."

"What're the odds they won't rebuild tomorrow?"

Jace shrugged. "I can think of worse ways for the Imps to blow resources."

Taking out a spaceport would be a major step in securing Kalandis, even if it did get rebuilt. Even if there were a dozen other Imp bases on the planet. Jace had put together the plan himself.

But Immel wasn't wrong to wonder what good it would do. Keep lying to her, Jace thought. You have an example to set. The spaceport was a mixture of flat metal landing pads, squat command bunkers, and slender control towers. Jace and Immel made their approach together, silent, observing the enemy patrols—pairs of Imperial troopers clad in black and red. The fog made avoiding the enemy easy enough, until the heat of a landing starship blasted the fog away, whipping a scorching, misty wall across Jace and a nearby patrol.

The Imperials hadn't turned, hadn't noticed anything before Jace's blaster bolts burned twin holes in the backs of their suits. The roar of the starship's engines continued as Jace and Immel rushed to drag the bodies under a half-repaired Imperial fighter.

One of the bodies groaned as the engine roar began to fade. Immel pressed the barrel of her rifle to the back of the man's helmet and pulled the trigger before rolling the corpse into the fighter's shadow. "Mercy shot," she muttered.

Either way, Jace thought.

Immel withdrew a beacon and clipped it to a nearby power terminal as the fog rushed back in. Jace squinted and adjusted his helmet's filters, looking in the direction of the vessel that had just landed.

"Southern tower is fifty meters that way," Immel said. "Prime target—you plan to help?"

Jace didn't turn, continuing to stare toward the looming shadow of the starship through the fog.

It was too large to be a bomber. Sleeker hull shape than most transports. "How are we doing for time?" he asked.

"Fighters are in the air by now. We've got at least two hours before they show."



Jace swore, then juttled a thumb in the direction of the starship. "All right—we're adjusting the plan. That thing that just landed? Pretty sure it's a planetary command ship on a refueling run."

Immel moved to Jace's side and knelt, gesturing for him to follow suit. "Another patrol," she said. "Keep talking."

"Ship'll be gone by the time our fighters arrive, but if we could capture that thing? Its navicomputer could point us to every Imp target on the planet."

Immel glanced at the power terminal where the metal disc of the targeting beacon hummed quietly. "Whole blasted world would be a blue milk run," she agreed. "But we're not equipped for a boarding action."

"We're not," Jace said, "and we don't have a lot of spare firepower, but we're not losing this chance."

Immel paused.

"Sir," she said. "I'm in command of these men, and I'm not sending them—"

Good woman, Jace thought, even as he interrupted her. "You're not sending them anywhere. You finish the mission, and I go in alone. Won't draw attention that way."

And it's not a bad way to go out, either, he added silently.

T-MINUS ONE HOUR.

The sentry looked almost innocent without his helmet—young, sun-haired, a splash of a birthmark on his neck. He walked down the command ship corridor, sidearm holstered, eating a ration bar.

Three steps, and Jace was out of his hiding place, gloved hands bringing the butt of his rifle onto the sentry's head. The man crumpled to the floor with barely a sound. Jace gasped in pain.

“Are you all right?” Immel asked, the comlink barely carrying her voice.

“Fine,” Jace said. “Took a bolt on the lower deck. Fused some skin to the armor, but I’m fine.” It was true, and the kolto injections dulled the pain. What bothered him was that he noticed the pain at all. The gifts of old age.

“Beacons are all set, fighters are almost on-site. I’d join you, but you might have noticed that ship just took off.”

“I noticed. I’ll be okay.” Jace followed the sentry’s path toward a heavy blast door—the entrance to the bridge. “What do you think of Private Kayle?” he asked.

“Bad shot, can’t read a label, probably poison himself one day. Knows his faults and takes orders.”

“Could be your new forward on the null-racket team. Plays a mean game. Think about it.”

Immel’s reply was a long time coming. “You going somewhere?”

“Might be,” Jace said. “Just keep him in mind. It’s good to spend time with your squad.”

Jace muted his comm and hit the control panel. The blast door irised open and the bridge came into view—black metal and blinking consoles, and a transparisteel dome looking out onto fog and sky. Only a handful of officers manned their stations; forty years of instinct and threat assessments told Jace they wouldn’t be a problem.

The Sith overseer was a different matter.

The Sith stood in the center of the bridge, a black cloud of dark robes with a metal armor core and the face of an etched brass mask. Jace didn’t wait for the mask to turn before running, boots slamming against the deck, directly toward his opponent.

There were no tricks to fighting Sith, Jace had explained to more officers and grunts than he cared to remember. Sith were powerful, and fast, and they broke

just as easily as anyone else. You couldn't afford to fear them—not even for a moment. The rest was just smart fighting.

The robed figure narrowed and twirled like a dancer, evading Jace's blaster bursts as he closed the distance. She—was it a woman?—reached for the lightsaber at her belt even as Jace howled and crashed into her, letting the weight of his armor take them both down.

Jace felt something give beneath him—a robed arm twisted out of position or a rib broken somewhere—even as he slammed an elbow toward where the Sith's head seemed to be. The hard impact of the deck told him he missed, and a second later a hand closed over his helmet and his vision turned white.

Heat stabbed at his face, lancing into his temples and trickling down his nose like sweat. He rolled, and blinked away spots in time to see the last arcs of electricity jump from the Sith's hand toward him. Any longer, or without the helmet, and the Sith's sorcery would've charred his skull.

Somehow, Jace had held on to his rifle. He tried to stand, unable to feel his legs, as the Sith reached for her lightsaber again—only to find it gone, dropped to the deck barely a meter away.

Jace squeezed his rifle's trigger. This time, the bolts struck heart and lung, even as his helmet filters pixilated from the electrical damage. He heard a muffled sound from the Sith, some final command, as she died.

For an instant, as Jace heard the shouting, saw the officers run toward the exit of the bridge, he felt the rush of victory. The command ship was his. Kalandis Seven was going to the Republic. Immel and her team could win the whole blasted planet.

Then the voice came over the bridge speakers:

“Self-destruct initiated.”

The consoles ripped apart, metal and plastic and glass burning and streaking through the air. The transparisteel cockpit dome shattered, raining knives. Jace swore and fell, his body shaking as he tried to crawl forward over the trembling deck and away from the fire he felt at his back.

So damn close, he thought.

His body reached the broken dome as the ship pitched forward, starting to hurtle toward the planet surface. He looked out into the endless fog and readied himself for the fall. No chute, no jump pack, no grav unit. There was comfort knowing what had to come next.

The ship shook, and Jace rolled out into the fog, falling free, looking down onto a rising shadow.

He hit surface fast—much too fast, much too close to be at ground level—and lay stunned for a few long moments. He realized he was hugging the wing of a Republic fighter, hovering near the plummeting mass of the Imperial command ship.

Painfully, he reached up to turn his comm back on. “Immel to Malcom,” he heard immediately. “Thought we could spare one fighter for you. Would’ve mentioned it if you hadn’t gone silent.”

“Thank you,” Jace said, and closed his eyes. He allowed himself to lie back on the wing and ache.

“Mission status?”

“Spaceport’s in burning little chunks. I’d feel pretty good if you weren’t showing off up there, blowing up command ships.”

“I was trying to capture it, Sergeant. We could’ve won the planet.”

He could hear the smirk in Immel’s voice, and he felt himself curl his lip in irritation. “Yeah, you really messed up—we’ll buy you a drink back at base, Colonel, but only the one. Bottom shelf stuff.”

Jace watched the fog drift around him, felt the surprisingly gentle thrumming of the wing beneath him, and crawled to the fighter’s upper hatch. The distant sounds of fire and tearing metal came from far below. Immel still didn’t understand, and this was his last chance to tell her. “No,” he said. “You won’t.”

“Repeat that?”

“I’ve been recalled, Sergeant. Right about now, there’s a transport arriving to take me to the Core Worlds.”

Jace heard Immel swear.

Then: “You SpecForce boys are all scum.”

## T-PLUS FORTY MINUTES

Jace watched the ochre dot of Kalandis Seven retreat through the viewport of the starship *Frontier Justice*. The ship’s captain—a Jedi Knight whose name Jace hadn’t caught, who had fought through half a dozen blockades just to arrive at Kalandis on time—hadn’t complained when Jace arrived battered and late. It was one thing Jace liked about Jedi: They took things in stride.

“Any idea why they sent you?” Jace asked. The Jedi Knight didn’t spare Jace a glance as he tore half-melted wires out from under an engineering console.

“The Supreme Chancellor thinks you’re wasted out here,” the Jedi said. “Beyond that, I don’t know.”

An electrical popping sound emerged from the console, and the Jedi shuffled out before continuing. “My guess is you’re in for a promotion. Whole war is changing.”

“Not the first time I’ve been told that,” Jace said. He watched Kalandis Seven disappear into the star field, the ochre dot now indistinguishable from a thousand other distant worlds and distant suns.

“The troops down there won’t last long, now,” Jace added. “They don’t have the training to hold the place.” He rubbed at his cheek, rubbed at his scars, then spoke again. “They’ll be overrun within the month. Casualties’ll be heavy.”

The Jedi stood and turned to face Jace. “You don’t know that,” he said. Jace shrugged. “I don’t,” he agreed. They’d share the lie together. “Doesn’t matter now. The Supreme Chancellor orders you back to the Core Worlds, that’s where you go.”

Still, blast her for taking him off the battlefield. Forty years of leaving soldiers behind and losing people was enough of a burden to shoulder. As for a promotion? More responsibility never made anything easier; it only changed the scope of the job.

Jace excused himself and made his way to the guest quarters—a spartan barracks where he dropped onto a cot and took up a datapad, browsing over a list of his comrades on Kalandis Seven. Shanra Immel; Amden vor Keioidian; Vaskus Kayle; Yennir of the Green. Everyone he'd fought with. The team he'd been willing to die for. The team he'd done everything to try and save.

When he reached the end of the list, he deleted the names from his personal file and put the datapad away.

Time to move on to the next battle.

**3,032 bby**

### **Galactic Battlegrounds: Boss Gallo Campaign**

The **War of the Gungan Tribes**. The origins of the conflict are unknown, but it is believed that Boss Rogoe instigated it, or at least took advantage of it and let it expand, in order to have the freedom to enslave the minor tribes.

Boss Gallo, although he was one of the strongest Bosses, refused to fight, but the other Gungans worried whose side he would take if he joined the fighting. His eventual inclusion would decide the fate of the war.

One day, the Boss had to gather animals for his village, Otoh Sancture, to have the Sacred Feast. Soon after his departure, half-wild bursas completely destroyed Otoh Sancture. Gallo was left alone, his village being history.

He wandered until he met the swashbuckling rogue Marsune, who gave him Gungan Glurg workers to rebuild Otoh Sancture in exchange for Gallo's 5 nerfs. While searching for a suitable place, Gallo found some Gungans standing with the bursas. He learned that the Gungan warlord Boss Rogoe had sent the bursas to kill Gallo, despite he hadn't decided to enter the war. Boss Gallo then changed his mind and decided to fight.

Gallo sent Rogoe's Militiagungs to tell their boss that Gallo would strike back. Then he and his workers built a small settlement and wasted no time recruiting

a small army to drive the bursas out of the remains of the old Otoh Sancture. After the bursas were defeated, Marsune appeared to Gallo and decided to take a position against Rogoe, whom he never liked.

Gallo, along with Marsune and his small band of soldiers, went to each of the important Gungan cities to ally with them. Gallo discovered that each city had its own major problem and decided to help them in order to vanquish Rogoe. The Boss Tenko of Otoh Jahai had lost his staff, and suspected the nearby town Otoh Langua had stolen it. Boss Hantic of Otoh Langua denied stealing it, but the city had its own problem: they had depleted their treasury from fighting, and would continue fighting to steal wealth until they got enough back. Boss Gallo found Otoh Jahai's scepter in the wilderness, and raided one of Rogoe's camps that stored the currency stolen from the other Gungans.

Helped by Gallo, Tenko and Hantic sent reinforcements to him. With the new army, the two leaders saved the town Otoh Urs from a clan of bursas, then rescued Boss Hoxie of Otoh Raban from Rogoe's prison camp.

With the major cities united, Gallo invaded Rogoe's huge fortified stronghold, Spearhead using Bongos from the Bongomeken Collective. Rogoe was killed when Gallo's forces destroyed his underwater High Tower Board Room.

After the battle, the Gungan tribes were united and Gallo built Otoh Gunga on Spearhead. The war also marked the beginning of Gungan Grand Army.

Gungan children thereafter often played "Marsune and Gallo", recreating the exploits of the two leaders in the swamps and forests of Naboo.

2,000 bby

## Darth Ruin

Two Jedi acquired a taste for rebellion during their victories in the Mandalorian Wars. They discovered pre-Republic Rakatan artifacts that led them to the Sith tombworld of Korriban. Despite their lack of a connection to the Sith species, they drew knowledge from the Sith tombs and declared themselves to be the new Dark Lords of the Sith—Darth Revan and Darth Malak.

Because they were known heroes of the Mandalorian Wars, many Jedi Knights regarded “the revanchist” and his former apprentice Alek as champions, and eagerly joined their cause. A Sith training academy was revitalized on Korriban, and a new corps of Dark Jedi readied to defend their growing Sith Empire. Under the command of Revan and Malak, they seized control of the bulk of the Republic fleet, and it was this act that initiated the Second Sith War.

The Sith Lords recovered an ancient Rakatan device, the Star Forge, which possessed the power to create fully formed machines of destruction. They amassed an even greater fleet and might have brought the Republic to its knees but for the efforts of the Jedi Knight Bastila Shan, a master of battle meditation.

Bastila subdued and captured Revan, and the Jedi Council Force-scoured his memories to learn the location of the Star Forge. In the process, the Jedi removed Revan's memories of his allegiance to the Sith and conscripted him to fight on their behalf. Revan killed Darth Malak and destroyed the Star Forge.

As for the end of this conflict, many records are either unclear or inconsistent. Revan's fate is not documented, but it is known that his defection caused a civil war amongst the Sith, and that a host of potential Sith Lords—including Darth Sion, Darth Kreia, and Darth Nihilus—attempted to take his place. According to one record, Brianna, an attendant to Jedi Master Atris, defeated the Sith Lord Darth Nihilus. Another record indicates that the Miraluka Jedi Visas Marr was involved in killing Nihilus, while still other records suggest that Nihilus slew Marr.

After the Second Sith War, the Jedi hunted down and exterminated the disciples of Darth Revan and Malak, and many other followers of the dark side. The Sith virtually disappeared for centuries, and it was believed the galaxy was at last safe from their dark order. This erroneous belief lasted until the emergence of Darth Ruin.

A mysterious figure who may have been an Umbaran, Darth Ruin revived the Sith Order and seduced a number of Jedi to his cause. A war with the Jedi Order inevitably followed, but the Sith soon turned the war upon themselves. Ruin was destroyed by his own disciples, who ushered in a millennium-long period of betrayal and darkness amongst the Sith.



**1032bby**

**Essential Atlas Extra: The Knight Errant Gazetteer**

**To:** Chancellor Genarra, Jedi Master

**From:** Vannar Treece, Jedi Master

**Re:** Operation Influx

Your Grace,

This cartographical survey and field report serves as a supplement to the informational material already filed regarding Operation Influx, soon to commence. As you know, I have already assembled a number of Jedi volunteers for this latest mission. And while my efforts are not affiliated with or endorsed by the Jedi Council or the Republic, I intend now, as in all the past occasions, to keep both bodies fully apprised. We do all serve the same goal: preventing the warring Sith Lords on the Outer Rim from advancing on the Republic.

The purpose of [Operation Influx](#) is simple: the interdiction of baradium production by the Sith Lord Daiman. Recent intelligence from a high-quality source in the Grumani sector indicates Daiman has discovered on Chelloa what would be considered, for Sith space, the mother lode of baradium, a compound used in a wide variety of explosive devices. With the mines on that world deep within the Daimanate now ready to begin shipping to Daiman's war forges nearer the front lines, we propose to take a portion of Chelloan production offline before it alters the balance of power in the region. Should Daiman exploit Chelloa's riches to its full potential, his stalemated war with his brother, Odion, could well end in a Daimanite victory. A decisive advantage to any Sith Lord in the region holds peril for the Republic, ultimately.

Operation Influx involves three stages:

insertion into Sith space, arriving at Oranessian, a Daimanite transport center;

the raid on Chelloa, itself; and

extraction via a direct hyperspace lane to neutral space.

My young aide, Kerra Holt, has already described the tactical portions of these stages in detail to the Defense Ministry. A copy of the briefing has been forwarded to Your Grace. The material that follows is familiar information, in large measure: a basic overview of the territory and its history, so far as it is known, followed by reports on a selection of other notable systems in the region. We certainly do not expect to visit any locations beyond Oranessian and Chelloa; navigation between most of these worlds is highly difficult, even where connecting hyperspace lanes exist. But since the deactivation of the subspace relays in the area by the Republic as a defensive measure long ago, very little is known about what powers hold sway in the sector. Knowledge of key locations is an important part of being prepared.

## **HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

The dire conditions facing the Republic today require little amplification on my part. It is difficult to recall another time in history when so many factors have gone against those working to promote peace and good will.

There is little need, for example, to describe our long years of war with the newly risen Sith Lords on the Outer Rim. The Grumani sector is one such nest of evil, but today's map of the galaxy shows many disparate areas under Sith control, like cancerous lesions. Alongside the Republic Navy, the Jedi Order sought to stem the tide by making stands on world after world, Republic-affiliated or not. But such efforts fell short, partially due to another factor: plague. If the Sith threat is the fire, the Candorian Plague proved a deadly and effective accelerant. Even the noblest defenders cannot stand long when their own bodies fail them. Systems under quarantine could not be defended -- and Sith Lords more interested in conquest than the well-beings of their own warriors took advantage. World after world fell to the Sith conquerors.

Exceptional times call for exceptional measures. One such measure came when the Republic turned to Jedi for political leadership. Jedi Chancellors such as Your Grace have served to guide both the Republic and Order through many a storm.

Another such measure was more extreme, controversial, and, sadly, probably necessary. Drawing a security cordon around the Core, the Colonies, and part of the Inner Rim, the Republic deactivated the hyperspace relays beyond. Both navigational and message relays were affected. Instantaneous communication with most of the Outer Rim ceased -- as did communication between those Rimworlds. No longer would the Sith Lords be able to easily exploit the existing

Republic systems to speed their own conquests; hyperspace couriers came back into use across much of the galaxy.

Perhaps more importantly, the action robbed the Sith of access to the constantly updated Republic database of hyperspace lanes. Many smaller vessels depend on hyperspace buoys to provide information as to their own location and other destinations; now, in many cases, Sith fliers are limited to the coordinates they bring with them. Scouting missions have revealed that some Sith Lords have constructed their own rudimentary hyperspace relay networks (in some cases, reverse-engineering or reactivating our own buoys), but thankfully, that has been a limited phenomenon. Most Sith genuinely do not know what lies beyond the stellar horizon -- and that has greatly added to the protection of the Republic. Our "firewall" is one of void and interstellar dust, using the vast distances between stars to slow the Sith spread.

The Republic has thus managed to preserve a good deal of what our civilization has accomplished. The same, sadly, cannot be said for the locations outside the cordon, where great libraries and storehouses of ancient wisdom have been taken by Sith invaders, destroyed, or both. Technological advancement has, in large measure, stagnated in areas under Sith control. There is little commercial incentive for innovation; some Sith areas have no units of exchange at all, with all manufacturing done by slave labor or droids.

There are corporations that continue to function under Sith rule; as will be seen, some Sith Lords permit firms to continue functioning in their space, provided they reap the rewards. The Republic has strongly encouraged all corporations with operations in Sith territory to withdraw behind the cordon, not just for the safety of their employees, but so that current Republic technology does not fall into Sith hands.

So the Republic survives, though much smaller than it had once been. (The popular term "rump Republic" is distasteful, but does describe what remains.) The Jedi spend much of their year at the frontier, with only some of their time devoted to their traditional duties of keeping order on Republic worlds. Republic military forces battle valiantly to protect the frontiers from further encroachment -- and while engagements continue, the good news, if it can be called that, is that many of our opponents seem more interested in fighting each other than invading the Republic. Prolonging this period of disunity among the Sith is one of the goals of my efforts in general, and Operation Influx in particular.

## THE GRUMANI SECTOR SITH: THE STATE OF PLAY

The exact number of Sith Lords in the Grumani and surrounding sectors remains a mystery. The Sith are not an organization like the Jedi Order; all that one has to do to become a Sith Lord is take the name -- and then, presumably, survive the wrath of those who would deny anyone else that title. While history records single figures with the title Dark Lord of the Sith, such as Marka Ragnos, who could exercise control over other Sith Lords, in today's times there appears to be no such central figure.

Through the deactivation of the Republic subspace communications relays (and thus, access to our database of hyperspace coordinates), the Republic has both prevented the spread of Sith contagion -- and, paradoxically, made it easier for upstarts to claim the Sith Lord mantle. Since the Sith themselves do not always know what conditions are in neighboring regions, it is relatively easy for rivals to stake their claims. This unfortunate consequence is well known to the Republic and Jedi, and accepted as worth the price of protecting the galaxy. The Sith are better divided than united!

A complete record of known Sith Lords active in the region would be long and outside the purview of this report, but it will suffice to say that few areas have seen more leadership change than the Grumani sector. The embattled planet Verdanth has, by the best count, been under the control of 17 different self-declared Sith Lords just in the last century!

In the last generation, however, one of the most important figures is certainly Lord Chagras. While no less bloodthirsty than his rivals, Chagras used cleverness to bring huge swaths of space under his control -- and is still regarded by refugees who lived under his rule as the lesser of several evils. (This is a turn of phrase, of course; evil is evil.) As Chagras consolidated power, attacks on the Republic increased in frequency; attentions turning from internecine struggle to the true desire of all Sith, galactic domination.

But eight years ago, Chagras evidently died under circumstances that have yet to be explained. There are no mass media in Sith space, no historians of any repute to record what happened. In short order, much of the sector plunged back into chaos, with upstarts -- including some who had previously fought in Chagras' name, like Lord Odion -- seizing large tracts of Chagrasi territory to form their own domains. While the Republic is perhaps safer from threats coming from the Grumani sector now in the post-Chagras years, it cannot be denied that the

suffering of the unfortunates there is unimaginable. A battlefield is no place to call home.

Several of the powers currently occupying the Grumani sector are described below. A word about terminology: many, but by no means all, of the Sith territories in the Grumani sector are described by placing the suffix *-ate* after the Sith Lord's name. Thus, the territory of Daiman is known as the Daimanate; Odion, the Odionate; and so on. In the case of Sith Lords whose names end with a vowel, the suffix *-nate* is used, such as in the case of Bactra's realm, the Bactranate.

The adjectival form of these realms is created by the use of the suffixes *ite* and *nite*. Thus, a Daimanite vessel, a Bactranite city, *etc.* While the adjective alone can be used to refer to a follower of one of the Sith Lords (such as, an Odionite), the term is most properly affixed to adherents, and not subjects. Daiman's slaves are not Daimanites; they are simply unfortunates!

**The Daimanate:** One of the successor states to the Chagras Hegemony, the Daimanate is ruled by Lord Daiman, a relatively young human who believes himself to be the creator of the universe. With Darkknell as its capital, the Daimanate includes systems such as Alphoresis, Gazzari, Nilash, Tergamenion, and the aforementioned Chelloa. The Daimanate contains many important resource worlds and several planets devoted to the production of armaments. As the borders of the Daimanate have shifted, our scouts report an increased employment of mobile factories to keep production close to the battle lines.

Recent scouting missions have confirmed the spread of Daiman's cult of personality to many subject worlds, with statues and holographic displays advertising his deranged philosophy. Hardcore Daimanites who are trained in Sith skills are employed as "Correctors" to keep the peace in Daiman's inner systems -- and to "correct" those who differ from Daiman's strange view of the universe.

**The Odionate:** Another successor state carved from the former territory of Lord Chagras, the Odionate is ruled by Lord Odion, Daiman's older brother and hated enemy. Lying between the Core and the rest of the Grumani sector, the space that is now the Odionate is well known to many Jedi veterans. It is a sprawling area whose borders are largely undefined -- and it is unclear what the present capital is, or if there even is one. The latter possibility -- that Odion has several

bases of operation -- squares with his method of operation; his military forces have no ranks whatsoever.

Odion practices species segregation within his realm, forcibly assigning beings to those jobs he deems their kinds to be best at. But the most notable -- and loathsome -- feature of the Odionate is Odion's death cult. Just as his brother depicts himself as the universe's creator, Odion longs to be its destroyer -- and many of Odion's warriors long for nothing more than a glorious death. Special units within Odion's force, including the Thunder Guard and Lightning Guard, have been observed to be nearly suicidal in their attacks, striking with reckless abandon.

Odion is rumored to maintain a mobile manufacturing center of his own, a modular space station known as The Spike. However, its location is unknown, as is its true size.

**The Bactranate:** An aged Quermian, Sith Lord Ayanos Bactra rules an expanse abutting space known to be under Daimanite control; its borders may reach the Odionate. Recent information places the capital of the Bactranate on Jutrand.

Intelligence on the Bactranate has been relatively easier to come by, given the nature of the regime. Unlike other Sith Lords who dissolve corporations and enslave their workers, Lord Bactra sees them as assets, allowing him to extend his spiny fingers into parts of Sith space he cannot militarily dominate. The Bactranate contains many resource worlds of note, including Sarrassia.

**The Chagrasi Remnant:** While many of systems formerly under the control of Lord Chagras have since fallen to other Sith Lords, intelligence reports suggest that a number of systems cling together, holding out against invaders. It is unclear whether the Remnant actually has a single overlord or even a functioning government. This is one of the difficulties in sifting intelligence so far removed from the source: it's possible the "Chagrasi Remnant" may simply refer to an area, and not an active Sith power.

There are, sadly, countless other areas under the sway of other Sith Lords; the aforementioned simply covers the known players in the immediate region.

## SYSTEM PROFILES

Much of what is presented about the systems below is from before Sith occupation. The term used below for this knowledge, "Republic-era," does not imply past Republic membership; not all these worlds were previously affiliated. Rather, it serves as shorthand for a time when Republic citizens were able to move freely in these systems.

**Alphoresis:** Remembered in history books as the plagueworld, Alphoresis was the site of the infamous Breath Stealing eleven centuries ago which claimed the lives of every child under eight years of age. Since repopulated, some speculate it has succumbed to Candorian Plague under the chaotic Sith environment that is tearing apart the Grumani sector.

**Aplooine:** Smothered in black ash up to 300 meters deep, Aplooine possesses only a scattering of stable landing points atop weathered mountains. It lacks a breathable atmosphere but has harbored colonists since the Kymoodon Era due to its position on the Duros Space Run.

**Aquilaris:** Aquilaris is, sadly, well known to this writer; it was one of the last planets on which I was able to mount an active defense ten years ago, before most Republic forces withdrew. (My assistant, Kerra Holt, resided there.) An aquatic paradise with lovely equatorial beaches and polar fjords, Aquilaris was a resort world for many years; in the waning years of the Republic foothold in the Grumani sector, it provided a home to many refugees fleeing Sith outrages.

**Byllura:** A forested world, Byllura was once one of the more beautiful destinations in the Grumani sector. On the main continent, rivers flow down from a raised central plateau to the oceans, making for a number of amazing waterfalls. Republic engineers crafted one large river delta into a series of terraces, creating the capital city, Hestobyll.

It is unknown what condition the planet is in now. As one of the worlds of the Chagras Hegemony, it is suspected to have fallen to Lord Daiman or one of his immediate neighbors. Sith despise all that is good and beautiful; is it beyond hopeful to think they might have left Byllura's wonders intact?

**Chelloa:** The keystone to Operation Influx, Chelloa was well known to Republic colonists as a pleasant agrarian world. It fell to Lord Chagras late in that ruler's

reign, and has since fallen under the heel of Lord Daiman. Previously not of strategic importance, recent intelligence has revealed the discovery of rich veins of baradium beneath its surface.

Situated well within the Daimanate, Chelloa is reasonably protected from Odion and any of Daiman's other neighbors; any attempt to seize it would be suicide, so far from any attacker's supply lines. But with a known hyperspace lane to the Republic frontier nearby, a quick raid there could well delay its baradium operations.

The population of Chelloa is known to have decreased significantly over the years, as Chagras and Daiman have moved many of its residents to work and fight near the frontiers. Known remaining settlements on the planet include Jenith, which sits at the foot of a large mountain range; Picomith; Arboth; and the garden vale of Clains.

**Cmaoli Di:** With the lower Hydian now largely impassible for great stretches, proud Cmaoli Di has lost its status as the gatekeeper of the Brema sector. At last report the Council of Makers and Spinners had brokered neutrality with both Lord Daiman and Buruun the Bloodbringer, the Sullustan warlord who controls much of Brema space.

**Darkknell:** Once an important world in Outer Rim commerce, Darkknell is located in the Knel'char system, a triple-star formation. Knel'char I is the aging and decaying parent star; Knel'char II and III are extremely weak stars, orbiting each other as they make their distant circuit around Knel'char I.

Darkknell turns slowly, completing one rotation every thirty-two hours. Depending on latitude and season, this makes for very long days and nights; it's unknown whether the planet gets its name from such nights, but it's a good guess. A source of iridium and other strategic elements, Darkknell was home to several corporations and a sizable population including humans, Duros, Sullustans, and other species before falling to the Sith.

After the fall of the Chagras Hegemony, Lord Daiman took the planet for his capital, expending enormous resources and many lives to reshape the largest city, Xakrea, to suit his whims. According to interviews with refugees fortunate enough to escape, Daiman has constructed a large heptagonal fortress in the city known as the Sanctum Celestial.



**Fiviune:** A dead, silent world, Fiviune's surface is a jagged mass of tumbled rocky plates broken by spiky crags. Rumors abound that an ancient civilization once ruled Fiviune before it was destroyed under circumstances now recalled by none.

**Fostin Nine:** The ninth moon of ink-black Fostin is blessed with a layered atmosphere of valuable gases, each a different color and each at a different elevation. Its air is presumably still mined with scoop-ship flyers, though it is unlikely that tourists still come to view the sky paintings stirred up by its seasonal tempests.

**Gallion:** Gallion is one of the larger planets with a rocky surface to be found in the sector. Interestingly, the low density of the planet results in significantly lower gravity, resulting in a planet where the proportions of life are often titanic.

**Gazzari:** It is unclear who currently controls Gazzari; the inhospitable world is near the constantly-moving frontier between Daiman and Odion's territories -- and not far from the Bactranate. Republic surveys of Gazzari years ago found a breathable atmosphere, greatly polluted by ash from the planet's many volcanoes. Its terrain features ridges and craters, with spires formed by acid rain. Tectonically active, the planet receives a large number of meteor strikes owing to its presence in a stellar nursery. Republic industry never found its way to Gazzari; it's a planet only the Sith could love!

**Greeve:** A heavy-gravity farm world, Greeve's simple people have been considered the yokels of the Grumani for centuries, but have also supplied countless armies with much-needed muscle.

**Heptooine:** One of the oldest relics of Republic colonization in the Grumani sector, Heptooine subsisted for millennia as a frontier outpost until civilization sprang up around it. I fear that the Sith have accomplished what entropy could not, and that Heptooine has reverted to barbarism after long decades of war and famine.

**Jutrand:** To the best of our knowledge, the megalopolis of Jutrand is the current capital of the Bactranate. Completely rebuilt after stone mites leveled the city-planet during the Hundred Year Darkness, Jutrand boasts hundreds of corporate headquarters -- while the citizens dependent on those corporations struggle to survive on a diet of alley lichens.

**Kamasto:** A frigid world revolving around a forlorn orange dwarf, Kamasto housed the monasteries of the Mani before their schism, and has occasionally served as the site of ill-fated attempts at diplomacy.

**Nakrikal Singularity:** This black hole tugs on the fabric of hyperspace, sometimes addling the navicomputers of starships passing down the Sanrafsix Corridor. We are giving this part of the sector a wide berth; our mission will be perilous enough as it is.

**Nilash:** I have read the Ithor Outreach anthropological narratives from before the war; the inventiveness and spirit of the tree-dwelling Nilash natives is inspiring and their ability to form telepathic group minds is remarkable. Has Daiman preserved anything of their culture? Nilash is a known source of anthracite and Daiman would surely raze its jungles to build war factories.

**Obica:** Located in the western reaches of Grumani sector, Obica isn't considered particularly strategic by any of the known parties at odds in the region. But the world is noteworthy as the holy world of the Spumani, a site of annual pilgrimages and seemingly semi-annual wars. Centuries ago, access to Obica was controlled by the feared Scholastic Guardians, who would interrogate visitors to ensure they were members of the Spumani faithful. The current state of affairs on Obica is unknown.

**Oranessian:** Cloud-shrouded and stormy, Oranessian is the first step in our planned raid to Chelloa. Near the termini of many hyperspace routes -- including, conveniently for us, one leading on a winding path to the Republic frontier -- Oranessian is known from past scouting missions to be a busy place: a Daimanite dispatch station for support vessels departing to Daiman's frontiers. Relatively far from the Odionate, Oranessian is lightly defended.

Oranessian was originally scouted as a target for a Jedi raid itself. When news of baradium-mining operations on Chelloa was received, we reworked our existing plan to make an Oranessian operation the first stage of our attack on Chelloa.

**Phaegon:** A mining world long exploited for its minerals, Phaegon has been a frequent prize for warmongers. Analysts doubt the planet still holds anything of value.

**Qi Lozar:** A blazingly hot desert world, Qi Lozar has long been a haven for refugees, hermits and others seeking to escape inconvenient pasts. Those

seeking passage to Qi Lozar must bargain with smugglers or entrust their lives to the reckless hyperspace scouts of the Grumani Hydian.

**Samhar:** A verdant, emerald-green forest world, Samhar has traditionally held itself aloof from the region, paying more regard to their own intrigues than to Republic Chancellors or Sith Lords. The near-human Samhari have few friends in this region, and little is known of their fate.

**Sanrafsix:** Fortunate, tragic Sanrafsix sits at the intersection of the Duros Space Run and the eponymous Sanrafsix Corridor. Because this hub of trade and cosmopolitan cultural exchange could not maintain quarantine during the first year of the Candorian outbreak, it ultimately isolated its groundside population to inevitable death. The orbital stations of Sanrafsix are presumably still in business, though which Sith Lord holds sway here is a matter of debate.

**Sarrassia:** The Sith are the enemies of life itself, yet I will allow that isolated and accidental good can sometimes result from their rule. The religious war that has devastated Sarrassia since the rule of Chancellor Am-Ris is reportedly at an end under the rule of Lord Bactra, who has kept the Grumani Hierophants in check and barred Spumani Crusaders from pursuing their typically sanguinary quests. Though Bactra cares only for the planet's deposits of Sarrassian iron, I am grateful for any circumstance that lessens bloodshed.

**Syned:** Lord Chagras' reach in his day extended all the way to this inhospitable world, a planet shrouded in ice. Located in a cluster of blue newborn stars, Syned was captured relatively recently, in astronomical terms, by its weak sun. As such, the planet spins rapidly, turning a complete rotation in a little less than four standard hours. A heavy molten core far beneath the surface counter-balances the planet's fast rotation to produce a standard gravity environment.

While there is a thin atmosphere, environment suits are needed to survive life on the surface. Said surface has a tortured appearance, with shattered ice sheets broken by ancient tectonic activity frozen into place. Physicists expect the planet to eventually tidally lock to its parent star, thawing the dayside.

**Tanta Aurek:** Tanta Aurek derives its name from the fact that it and Tanta Besh appear to be a double star in the skies of Obica, though the two systems are actually far apart. Tanta Aurek's primary world, Scelepas, was once a motley trade world dominated by merchants from Cmaoli Di, but has since descended into grinding poverty.

**Tanta Besh:** An uninhabited system of tumbling rock, Tanta Besh is known for its system primary, an unstable blue giant whose pulses and erratic changes in luminosity are raw material for diviners on many Grumani worlds.

**Tergamenion:** The darkworld of Tergamenion houses Daiman's research and production complexes that produce night-vision gear and advanced targeting systems, according to Republic Intelligence. Shutting it down would be a blow to the Daimanite, but its location is too remote.

**Tramanos:** This watery moon has an atmosphere high in cyanogen, explaining the presence of a Celegian colony. Yet the air is not pure cyanogen, and therefore oxygen breathers live there too with the aid of hazard masks.

**Vellas Pavo:** In better times, Vellas Pavo was one of a small number of planets in the area producing gadolinium, an important element used in the manufacture of superconductors. Once under the thumb of Lord Chagras, it is unknown who, if anyone, rules here now.

**Ventruun:** A world of canny merchants and frenzied deal-making, Ventruun is one of the few Grumani worlds where life can seem somewhat normal. But seemingly all Ventruuni intrigues lead back to Sith puppetmasters, who have made the world an arena for their contests.

**Verdanth:** This world has been fought over by Sith Lords so frequently that the title "Conqueror of Verdanth" seems to pass to a new tyrant every few years. Its wild jungles continue resist the colonization efforts of its transplanted refugees, but its strategic position on the Sanrafsix Corridor and near the intersection of the Grumani, Sanbra, and Bon'nyuw-Luq sectors cannot be ignored.

**Whinndor:** A sulfuric atmosphere and shallow seas brimming with organic molecules make Whinndor a cradle for future life. Yet its position on the border between the Daimanite and Odionite have left it a contested world, and its fragile biochemical balance may not survive the scars left by their war.

## CONCLUSION

This concludes my report on Operation Influx, its zones of operation and the surrounding territories. It is my hope that our efforts can bring some small relief to those living there, while delaying future attacks on the Republic.

A personal note, if I may. It is the fashionable opinion of some in the Republic to believe that those non-Sith who still live in the afflicted areas are, themselves, to blame for their fate; that they are responsible for not rising up against those who enslave them. I am on record as believing this highly underestimates the challenge that means. Should ordinary people prevail where Jedi Knights and navies have failed? I dearly hope that can one day be the case -- but for now, it falls to expeditions like mine to show that the Sith *can* be defeated, and that hope can be brought to places where none has existed for decades.

Such is the challenge facing myself and my team, including, for the first time, the aforementioned (and newly knighted) Kerra Holt, returning to her home sector to fight for our cause. May the Force be with her -- and with us all.

Best regards,

Vannar Treece

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## HISTORICAL POSTSCRIPTS

The communication above was discovered in the Jedi archives, and tells much about the state of the Grumani sector during the times a generation before the Ruusan Reformations. While the fate of Treece's expedition -- and what followed -- are chronicled elsewhere, the following pieces of additional background may be instructive:

### Proto-Sectors

The Draggulch Period of 2000 BBY to 1000 BBY saw the Republic shrink and civilization descend into chaos, with many star systems closing their borders against the darkness. The Jedi Order changed in response to the horrors of these centuries, with bands of Knights swearing to defend individual worlds and eventually regions against slavers, pirates and warlords. In some places the Jedi supported existing governments and rulers; in others, they became hereditary

lords themselves, defending their people against a host of threats. The Supreme Chancellors of the time -- more often than not Jedi themselves -- divided many troubled parts of the galaxy into Jedi baronial sectors, thereby seeking to coordinate the endless struggle against the Sith.

In 1004 BBY, the Jedi Order united the baronies as the Army of Light, commanded by Lord Hoth. When the Ruusan Reformations transformed the millions of ancient sectors into 1,024 new regional sectors, many old baronial borders were carried forward into the new system, as well as a host of other cartographic artifacts from ancient surveyors' maps and former political territories.

### **The Children of Mani**

Even before the coming of the Sith, trouble was no stranger to the Grumani spaceways. Many of the original human colonists of the region were adherents of Mani, a messianic figure who had told his disciples to seek perfection in the wilds beyond the galactic frontier. But a few centuries after settlement began to spread from worlds such as Aplooine and Heptooine, the faith of Mani was split by a schism that soon proved irreparable. The orthodox Grumani held that moral conduct could only come from Mani's directives, as interpreted by his Hierophants; while the breakaway Spumani believed Mani had made a secret directive to the elect, teaching that salvation must come from within, through constant testing of the self.

The two branches of the faith had warred for some eight centuries until the coming of the Sith Lords, with each claiming their own faith as the proper name for their shared region of the galaxy. Though the schism eventually cooled to mutual disdain, even in the time of the New Republic diplomats had to be carefully schooled in knowing when to refer to Grumani sector, when to refer to Spumani sector, and when to avoid naming the sector entirely.

**1032 bby**

**Knight Errant: Influx**

immediately before the events of Star Wars: Knight Errant #1

"We ought to shoot you where you stand!"

The hooded human trudged over the hill, his boots raking through the mud.

"We're here," he said, keeping his voice firm. There wasn't any point in apologizing. Not in this place -- or to these people. "Just show us where our ride is."

The Daimanite Sith warriors didn't lower their rifles. Even on rain-drenched Oranessan, Lord Daiman insisted that his troopers shine their silvery combat suits every day. This day, the planet seemed especially intent on testing their armor. Hailstones ricocheted off them in all directions, raising such a raucous din that the first speaker -- a burn-scarred woman in worker's overalls -- had to shout to be heard.

"You're not where you're supposed to be, pilot!" Stepping between the warriors, the woman flashed a hand-held light in the face of the newcomer, a rugged man in his fifties. "You were supposed to be here for flight prep twenty minutes ago," she yelled. "What in blazes were you doing down in the mud flats?"

"Our shuttle was damaged in the storm," the arrival said, pointing over the hillcrest. Two similarly cloaked companions arrived behind him, both flashing their identification badges. "We landed where we could. What does it matter? We're here."

Ice blue eyes squinting, Vannar Treece surveyed the surroundings. Beyond the scabrous ground crew chief and the four sentries loomed a massive, multi-gunned Sith transport, waiting for its flight team. Identical transports were already lifting off in the distance, climbing over the towering nuclear furnaces that provided fuel for Daiman's vessels at this waystation. The flames atop the massive permacrete cones provided the only lighting for the area, forcing the ground crews to use their helmet-lights even at high noon -- which it was now.

Welcome back to Sith Space, Vannar thought. See the sights -- if you really want to.

Vannar took a step toward the waiting transport, only to be blocked by the ground team leader. Shining her light at his gloved hands, the age-worn woman flew into a rage. "Where's your dispatch case? You'd better not tell me you've come all the way here without it!"

Vannar's short female companion stepped forward. Hazel eyes flashing beneath her cowl, she raised her hand before the Sith crew chief. "We don't need a dispatch case."

"You sure as blazes do, little missy!" The ground crew leader ripped at the newcomer's hood, revealing a girl of eighteen, dark of hair and complexion. "I don't know what they're thinking, sending younglings out here as pilots. Surely Daiman can do better than you!"

Smoldering, the girl looked urgently to Vannar. He already knew. This wasn't working.

"This isn't right," the scarred woman said, stepping back toward the troopers. "One less transport in the convoy won't make any difference. Kill them."

The quartet of warriors raised their rifles. Vannar's companions leapt forward, light flashing in front of them. The girl reached the Daimanites first, cleaving the muzzle of the nearest warrior's weapon in two with her lightsaber. A fraction of a second later, she did the same to the sentry himself.

"What the--?" The crew chief stumbled backwards and pulled her blaster. "Jedi!"

Leaping out of her cloak, Kerra Holt pounced, vaulting over the second warrior's shoulders and diving for the boss. The comlink flew from the older woman's hand, burying itself in the Oranessian muck. Seeing the second sentry turning toward her, the young Jedi thrust her lightsaber backward into the crew chief's body. The woman's cry of pain was still on the air when the attacking sentry collapsed before Kerra, slain by the yellow lightsaber of Vannar Treece.

Vannar looked to the right to see Dorvin Eltrom, his other companion, standing over the corpses of the other two Daimanites. The Cerean removed his hood, raindrops spattering off his conical cranium. Vannar quickly extinguished his lightsaber and scanned the area. The hail had turned to a cooling rain, the downpour and darkness combining to screen their melee from the massive



service hangar nearly a kilometer away. Timely, he thought. A good omen for a long mission's first step.

Hair dripping, the girl knelt over the dead crew chief's body. "'Little missy?' Is that how Sith swear these days?"

"I never know what to expect," Vannar said, chuckling to himself. Part of the novelty of this mission would be seeing Kerra's response to Sith space, territory she'd studied so long from afar. Kerra had been under his tutelage for most of the decade since he helped to evacuate her from this region. Now, she'd had her first contact.

It was no surprise that Kerra's Force skills had gone undetected when she lived the Grumani sector. With the Republic abandoning much of the Outer Rim, Jedi scouts were no longer identifying potential students in those regions. As far as Vannar was concerned, it was almost better for Sith slaves never to learn about their potential Force talents, lest they be pressed into service as Sith adepts. Anything was better than that. But Kerra had escaped, and while Vannar would have wanted to remain a part of her life regardless of whether she had Jedi potential, the fact had made it possible for him to play an active role in her education.

She had taken to the training quickly. Her mind and body were all she had left in the galaxy; these, she committed fully to absorbing skills and knowledge. Vannar wasn't her Master in the formal sense; she didn't really have one. A lot of the regular ways of doing things had changed by necessity in recent times. With Knights needed at the front, there simply weren't enough teachers to go around; Padawans tended to apprentice for short periods under whoever was available. But Vannar, as much father as mentor, had made a point of following her progress. Once he began waging his own private war in Sith space, Kerra had begged to assist him in any way possible.

While there was no thought of taking the adolescent on any of his missions, Vannar found that teenage Kerra was helpful to his cause in innumerable ways. She was an organizational dynamo, helping him to transform his lofty visions into concrete actions. He had the connections and the personal magnetism necessary to attract followers and material support; Kerra made sure it got where it needed to go. He was sure she'd made it possible for him to mount one additional operation a year. None of those were grand missions to free her

homeland -- Vannar wondered if anything could do that -- but it was making a contribution.

And now, years later, she was finally here.

"I'm guessing she's got what we're looking for," Kerra said, sorting through the items attached to the dead woman's belt. Finding a control device, she turned to face the huge transport and pressed a button. The massive forward hatchway groaned open, revealing a yawning cargo area inside.

As their intelligence reports had suggested, the giant transport was empty, waiting for a flight crew that would never arrive. Vannar raised his comlink to his mouth. "Objective vessel secured. Influx begin. Team may approach."

"Influx confirmed. Stand by."

Vannar's full Jedi team was stationed beyond the next ridge, with the wreckage of the small personnel shuttle they had intercepted during their approach to Oranessan from Republic space. Intercepting the flight crew and arriving in their stead had gotten Vannar and his companions close enough to the Sith transport landing zone to secure it. The big transport -- a Daimanite Heavy-Lift Starcrosser, if the information in the reports was accurate -- would be his team's ride for the rest of Operation Influx. Vannar slapped the side of the cargo door as Dorvin dashed up the steps, headed for his intended station in the cockpit. The ship would be a pretty big gift to a Republic Defense Ministry starved for information about what Daiman's forces were flying these days. But it was also completely secondary to the mission's main goal.

Kerra had selected the name for the operation, as she'd done for all of them since she was thirteen. It was kind of a good luck charm, Vannar thought. Her original idea had been to call this operation "Deadlock" until Vannar pointed out that, while stalemating the squabbling Sith Lords against one another was, indeed, one of their goals in this mission, it was a poor thing to root openly for. When the Sith battled the Republic, at least one side was usually looking to avoid civilian casualties. When Sith Lords fought each other, as Daiman and his hated brother Odion did, anyone caught between was in grave danger. Indeed, nihilist Odion lived to mow down innocents. Another sick Sith Lord.

Standing guard at the bottom of the ramp, he watched as Kerra scrunched her nose at the foul Oranessian air. It was the first time she hadn't been in motion since they left the jumping-off point in the Republic.

"Fly and die for Lord Daiman," Kerra said, looking back at the corpses. It was far from her first kill; Vannar knew that was years earlier. But she seemed troubled. "Why is anyone willing to do anything for Daiman?"

"He's the one in charge."

"He's mentally ill," Kerra said.

Vannar nodded. Anyone who imagined himself the creator of the universe, with all other organics simply soulless automatons placed here (by himself, of course) for his own amusement definitely had some issues to work out. Most of the warlords out here did. But Vannar wasn't really interested in the state of the health care system for Sith Lords.

Neither was Kerra, he saw, who changed the subject quickly. "What's a dispatch case?"

"No idea," Vannar said. The ground crew chief had asked them about it, earlier.

"It could be important," Kerra said, looking back at the dead woman's body, drenched in the mire.

"It could also be nothing," Vannar said. He knew what was coming on. Kerra was driven and detail-oriented -- and nothing drove her like realizing there was a detail she hadn't considered. He'd seen that send her into a spin in her younger days, but she'd been better about that lately. Still...

"Are you sure you're all right, Kerra?"

"I'm fine. Don't worry -- no first-day jitters."

"Oh, I wouldn't have expected them. You changed tactics pretty well with the crew chief back there," he said. Kerra's attempt at persuasion didn't seem to have worked, but he wouldn't hold that against her. She never liked using the Force to influence others. It was just part of her makeup. "Still, it is your first mission..."

"I'm fine," Kerra said, tromping off in the mud to watch for the arrival of the rest of the team. "I just didn't like posing as Sith."

Vannar laughed. "Without subterfuge, we wouldn't get very far," he called after her. "This isn't a place where you can be yourself. Not for very long, anyway!"

\* \* \*

Kerra looked out from the over-sized cockpit of the Sith transport and blanched. Vannar was right. If this polluted, ravaged world was any indication, this sector had completely forgotten any good that the Jedi might ever have done here. The Jedi had pulled back when the Republic did, conserving their numbers to prevent an all-out Sith assault on the Core Worlds. If not for the efforts of Vannar Treece and his volunteers, there wouldn't be any Jedi activity in the Grumani sector at all. And Vannar only staged quick-hit raids with the quiet, unofficial consent of the Jedi Order -- rarely anything with far-reaching ramifications.

But this mission was something more -- or, it promised to be. Kerra looked back at the command deck of the transport, now alive with her Jedi companions. So many of the brightest stars of the Order were here, it almost looked like a satellite Jedi Council. Some, like the Trandoshan, Mrssk, she knew from previous Treece operations; others, like the Quarren Master, Berluk, she knew only by reputation. Treece had used the gravity of this operation to call in every favor he was owed. And it hadn't been a difficult case to make. Lord Daiman had struck baradium.

Necessary for thermal detonators and other weapons, baradium wasn't something a Sith Lord could trade for. The shortage of it acted as a logistical roadblock to evil ambitions. Many of the warring princelings had long since exhausted any commercial mines developed during earlier times, taking instead to stealing whatever supplies their neighbors had. But if the intelligence reports Vannar had recently received were true, Daiman had found the largest baradium strike in more than a century right in his own backyard, on agrarian Chelloa.

Vannar hadn't told her much about the source of his information, except to say that he trusted it absolutely. And everyone Vannar spoke with understood the implications: should Daiman weaponize the baradium of Chelloa, he could easily

best not only brother Odion, but all his warring neighbors. And that, ultimately, would mean trouble for the Republic, if its enemies joined behind a single leader.

The Jedi would have to beat them to that -- by uniting behind Vannar. Who, as always, had a plan ready to go.

Operation Influx was simple. Striking first at the Daimanite transport hub on Oranessan, the Jedi team would steal one of the massive ore transports heading to Chelloa. There, they would knock the baradium shipping depot offline before a kilogram of the stuff made it to any of Daiman's munitions factories nearer to the front line. It wasn't a permanent solution, but they didn't have the luxury of waiting for one. "Interdiction buys time," Vannar had said.

It felt good to be in the field with the team, instead of seeing everyone off at the spaceport. And Vannar's protectiveness aside, most of them seemed happy to see her along, too. She'd worked with so many of the volunteers in the preparations for past missions, getting to know them and what moved them. A few, like her, had been forced to flee from territory under Sith occupation. Others were followers of Vannar's strategic vision; for someone not on the Jedi Council, there were few Jedi with more influence.

Dorvin's reasons for being here were more complicated, she knew. His Cerean species was a microscopic minority on Coruscant, their community all that remained from a corporate slave-raid on their homeworld centuries earlier. Barred from repatriation by Cereans fearful of technological contamination, Dorvin's kind lived with alienation every day of their lives. Helping others return home meant something.

Sliding out from beneath the control console -- an uncomfortable position for someone with his pointed skull -- Dorvin smiled up at her. "It was pleasing to see you in action, Kerra Holt," he said in his regal-sounding voice. "You do the chancellor proud."

"What?"

"You've got a green lightsaber," Dorvin said. "An uncommon choice among today's recruits. Do you aspire to become a consular, like Chancellor Genarra?"

"No." Kerra had never met the Republic leader, one of a string of Jedi chosen to lead the body through an era that called for extreme measures. But she had certainly sent her enough reports on Vannar's behalf.

"Ah." Dorvin twirled the end of his moustache. "Then perhaps you honor someone from our history. Will you make me guess?"

"No, actually, I just grabbed a crystal from the top of the pile."

"Hmm."

Visibly disappointed, Dorvin sniffed and slid back beneath the control console. Kerra shook her head. Dorvin lived for tradition, taking comfort in it. Many did. But Kerra never had time for the trappings, trying instead to learn all the skills the Jedi could teach her as quickly as possible. It was the better path, she thought. Rituals belonged to a time when the Jedi hadn't been at war for all living memory. She'd excused herself within seconds of the end of her knighting ceremony to get the staging area. What good were flowery words when people were suffering?

"I have a problem," said Dorvin.

"What?"

Dorvin poked his head back out from beneath the console. "It's a Vannar problem. Call for him, please."

\* \* \*

Everything stopped when Vannar Treece entered a room. Even this group of luminaries, Kerra noticed.

The darkling cloak of the Sith pilot gone, Vannar stood again in his usual white tunic and muted gray vest. Blond hair going to a genteel white, he made every effort to look like just another Jedi. But clearly, that wasn't so. After so many years as his ward, Kerra sometimes forgot how much weight Vannar carried with others. Polite as he was, Dorvin certainly didn't intend her any offense in going over her head, even though she was, technically, Vannar's principal aide. It was just understood. There were problems, and there were Vannar problems.

"All right, Dorvin," Vannar said, surrounded by his watchful colleagues in the cockpit. "Tell me again, without the technical part."

"It's bad."

"That's not technical enough."

"The navicomputer won't boot up."

"Have you tried turning it off and on again?"

"No, I mean it can't boot up," Dorvin said. He swung open the cover panel. A gaping hole existed in the device, wide enough for the Cerean to put his arm through. "See here? It's missing the activation cylinder!"

Vannar stared.

"It's like a key," Dorvin said. "Without it, this ship goes nowhere."

Standing by the doorway where she'd been since fetching their leader, Kerra hid her clenched fists. It didn't make any sense. The other transports were already leaving for Chelloa. This one was ready to go; it was just waiting for its flight crew. It wasn't under repair.

It should be whole.

"Did we miss something?" Vannar said. "When we took out the flight crew, were they carrying something?"

Kerra's eyes narrowed. The dispatch case.

That had to be it. Kerra hadn't been the one to shoot down the little shuttle carrying the expected flight crew, but she had entered the wreckage to retrieve their cloaks and identification badges. Weakly, she spoke up. "There was a case trapped under one of the consoles," she said. "I thought it was a personal item."

Dorvin looked back at her. "How big?"

"That big." Swallowing, she pointed to the hole in the control console.

A murmur rose from the collected Jedi. Almost every one of them was twice her age or more, their first mission long since past. She wasn't here because of Vannar -- in fact, he preferred to keep her out of harm's way. She was here because she thought of everything.

But she hadn't thought of this.

"Calm down, everyone," Vannar said, shooting Kerra a look and a calming nod. "Things must have changed since I was here last," he said. He approached the defunct console. "Why wouldn't they keep the activation cylinders with the ships? What are the flight crews doing carrying them?"

The leather-faced Trandoshan spoke up. "Sssecurity," Mrssk said. "Daiman doesssn't trussst anyone not to desssert."

"Or to join the other side," Kerra said, daring to pipe up.

Vannar leaned against a chair back and exhaled. "It does make sense," he said. "Daiman's flight crews get a lot more indoctrination than his ground crews do. If he's afraid of anyone stealing a transport, this would address that."

Kerra sagged against the door jamb. They'd suspected there might be some additional security, beyond the identification badges. But she'd guessed that would be limited to keeping hyperspace coordinates from anyone but the pilot. The Jedi brought their own coordinates to and from Chelloa. But this was something they'd never expected. "It didn't look like anything important," Kerra said, shaking her head. "And it was stuck, after the crash." She looked up. "But I could have gotten it out."

"You can't think of everything, Kerra. These things happen," Vannar said. A few kindly faces looked back at her.

"We have the vehicle we arrived in," Dorvin said. "We don't have a part that will fit this navicomputer. But can't we do the mission with our own ship? Without the Daimanite transport?"

"They wouldn't let us near Chelloa," Vannar replied. "We've got to look like we belong there on approach." They only had an hour to enter the Chelloan system, sabotage the shipping terminal, and depart under Vannar's plan. Fighting their way into the system would alert Daiman to the danger, allowing him to redouble



his guard planetside. No, they had to look like they belonged to the convoy, from start to finish. There was no other way.

Straightening, Vannar came to a decision. "We go to the fallback."

"Master Treece, no!" Kerra bolted upright. She knew the alternative plan well; she'd helped craft it. If they couldn't reach Chelloa, they had to return to the Republic, taking advantage of any opportunities that presented themselves to shoot down ore transports leaving Oranessan for Chelloa. It was much the inferior plan. They wouldn't take out more than a couple, for sure -- and Daiman could easily reroute other vessels to the mining world. Chelloa's deathworks would go online, as scheduled.

"Kerra, I don't know what else we can--"

"We can still go to Chelloa! Maybe we can hijack an ore transport in route, the same way we ambushed the flight crew!"

"That was a small personnel shuttle," Vannar said. The ore transports, by contrast, bristled with weapons. It was part of what made stealing one worthwhile.

"Or we can go back to the flight crew's ship. I can get the cylinder this time!"

"It's too far, Kerra -- and you said the ship was crushed. It might not even work any more."

"We can try!"

Looking uncomfortably at his listeners, Vannar stepped through the crowded cockpit. "Excuse me," he said, taking Kerra's arm and leading her into the hallway outside.

In the long shadows of the hallway, he spoke in hushed tones. "These are not my Knights, Kerra. You know that. They're on loan, more or less. I owe it to Chancellor Genarra not to waste their lives on a ten-percent plan!"

Kerra looked down the hall to the exit, and back to Vannar again. "We've come all this way," she said. "We're here. We can do something. We shouldn't go back."

"Are you speaking for all of us, Kerra?" Vannar said. He looked down into her eyes. "Because it sounds to me like you're speaking for yourself. And I already know: just one Jedi isn't much good to anyone here in Sith space. You won't get noticed. You won't get anywhere."

Kerra held his gaze for a moment before looking away. This was the Vannar that other people heard -- the voice of authority. She always heard it from his side, rarely on the receiving end.

Suddenly, they both heard a new voice crackling from the cockpit. Vannar and Kerra turned to look inside.

"...and you'd better get moving, Transport Four!" It was the Sith control tower, situated on the other side of the great hangar. They wouldn't have had a visual on the fight in the rain and darkness, but they certainly knew that the transport wasn't in the air. "Get moving, or we're coming over there to get you!"

Vannar squeezed Kerra's wrist and released it before reentering the cockpit. "OK, there's only one thing to do," he instructed. "We don't have hyperdrive, but we do have a transport. There's no sense walking the kilometers back to our ship in a monsoon." He patted the broken console. "Dorvin, close it up and get us out of here."

Kerra watched as Vannar stepped toward the forward viewport. Arms crossed behind him, he looked out upon the pouring rain. Behind him, the collected Jedi mumbled assent. In the darkness of the hallway, Kerra knew that Vannar was right.

There was only one thing to do.

\* \* \*

Vannar looked at the monitor. This can't be. Not on her first mission.

He'd gotten a flash of the girl's intentions through the Force moments after she left the hallway, before she'd reached the exit to the transport. He'd ordered Dorvin to secure all hatchways against opening from the inside -- only to hear the whoosh when the main cargo gateway opened just as the transport was

lifting off. He'd forgotten Kerra still had the remote control for the door from the ground crew chief. But Kerra hadn't forgotten.

She had already landed in the mud and bounded off when he reached the opening. The transport climbing too high to jump from, Vannar had dashed upstairs to the command center. But even with altitude and the transport's external sensors, Oranessian's weather made it impossible to find a single figure on the ground.

"She can't mean to go back to where we shot down the flight crew," Vannar said, half aloud. It was too far on foot. But where else was there?

"We can't linger here, Master Treece," Dorvin said. They were sitting in mid-air, not going anywhere. It was back to their own ship or nothing. "There are dozens of Sith fighters parked beyond the hangar. If we have to fight, we'll never get off Oranessian!"

"I know, blast it!" Using a pair of macrobinoculars, he scanned futilely ahead. "I know. But not a moment before--"

"Wait!"

To Vannar's right, Mrssk pointed to one of the monitors looking to starboard and shouted. "Surface contact, organic! Mark two-eighty!"

"Give me the starboard gunnery cams, infrared!" Vannar said. Images flickered on the screen. There, through the telescopic sighting of the vessel's landing guns, he saw a single figure making its way from the large maintenance hangar. Fighting to bring the image into focus, Vannar was surprised to see sudden flashes of light from the contact. Green light.

"That's her!" Vannar yelled.

Ignoring a second, more urgent call from the Sith control tower, Vannar directed the transport down towards the besotted plain. Shaking his head, he marveled. Kerra had made her lightsaber into a beacon by turning it on and off repeatedly. Maybe one Jedi could get noticed out here -- at least by other Jedi!

\* \* \*

Kerra collapsed on the cargo deck, gasping for breath. Vannar had been ready in the open doorway to receive her, and it was a good thing, too. Dorvin, upstairs, had feared setting down again in the muck; the wiry girl had been forced to leap for the rain-slickened cargo ramp. If Vannar hadn't been right there, she would have slipped off.

The girl rolled over, rainwater streaming off her. Vannar looked at her muddied outfit. Over her Jedi uniform, Kerra wore the coveralls of the woman who'd led the ground crew -- the first casualty of her return to Sith space. With one heavy motion, Kerra pulled a large, opal tube from a long pants pocket and slapped it on the deck grating.

Vannar gaped. "Is that?"

"An activation cylinder!" Appearing behind Vannar, Dorvin reached past him and grabbed the rolling mass. "High marks to the Padawan! I mean -- to the Knight!"

Vannar knelt beside Kerra, still choking for breath. Running in that rain -- and in someone else's clothes! He couldn't imagine.

She spoke. "They had to have replacement navicomputers in the hangar," Kerra said, dripping wet. "Activation cylinders right inside. No reason to hide the keys when there's no ships attached!" Looking down at herself, she patted the Sith worker's uniform -- a uniform with a large singed tear, front and back, where the lightsaber had entered earlier. "I just had to be able to get into the door. Luckily, no one really looked at me. It's a pretty busy place."

"I bet it is," Vannar said, helping to steady his student and ward as the transport gained elevation. "But I thought you hated posing as Sith."

"I hate letting them win even more."

Vannar looked down at Kerra, amazed. Finding his comlink, he called the Cerean. "Are we in business, Dorvin?"

"Next stop, Chelloa!"

"Very well, then. Operation Influx is onto Phase Two!"

Clicking off the comlink, Vannar patted Kerra on her shoulder as she stood and walked past. "Pretty good work for the first time out," he said. "But you can see what I mean. You're a great planner, but things out here change faster than we can plan for them." He chuckled. "Maybe you should have called it Operation In Flux."

Shaking the water from her hair, Kerra looked back with a smirk. "Maybe I should have planned to bring a towel."

**c. 1010 B.B.Y.**

Author: Jedi Master Pernicar

*In our most recent confrontation with the Sith, I finally met up with my former Padawan, Wud Mortull, who went missing more than eight years ago. I had just slain three Sith soldiers when he called out to me. I turned to see an armored figure among many others on the battlefield, only this one was running at me with open arms and a broad smile on his face. I didn't recognize Wud at first, he'd grown so much. His face had broadened, and his chin seemed sharper. He laughed as he came at me, running as if to embrace me the way a son might embrace his long-lost father. And then a lightsaber suddenly appeared in his right hand and a red blade ignited.*

*Wud was still smiling when I cut him down.*

*Still smiling when I removed his weapon from his dead fingers.*

*Still smiling as I stood there, momentarily oblivious to the chaos around, and I wondered, Why red?*

*Surely I've seen enough Sith lightsabers in my lifetime that I should have wondered this before. But for some reason, I'd never pondered this question until the moment I realized Wud had forsaken the green-bladed lightsaber that he'd made for himself a decade ago. At the time, after he'd constructed that first lightsaber, he confided that he felt such a strong connection to it.*

*What had caused him to ally with the Sith, I cannot say. But as I held his Sith lightsaber, this poorly crafted insult to his heritage, it was hard for me to believe that he could have joined the Sith entirely willingly. I know it sounds ludicrous, but I wondered if the Sith lightsaber had been somehow responsible for his conversion. Was there anything in the Sith weapon's properties that might have made him want to relinquish his Jedi lightsaber?*

*I consulted our armorer, asking if she had any knowledge about whether any properties of Sith lightsabers affected the behavior or disposition of the user. She answered, "I know they affect me, because whenever I see a Sith holding one, I'm inclined to kill the Sith." Then she referred me to a holobook entry on the subject of crystals. Here is an excerpt:*

Red crystals are ordinarily unsuitable for lightsabers, since they are less stable than the customary green and blue crystals Jedi use for the blade generators in their lightsabers. However, red crystals—both genuine and synthetic—glow in harmonic vibration when energized by the dark side of the Force. When energized this way, red "Sith" crystals, as they are sometimes called, can actually produce a stronger blade that has the rare potential to "break the blade" of Jedi lightsabers, overloading the energy matrix and instantly burning out the opponent's weapon. Although this rarely happens, it is a known and frightening possibility in combat.

*Indeed, this is rare, as I have only seen a Sith lightsaber "break" a Jedi lightsaber on one occasion, something I believed, at the time, was a defect in the Jedi weapon. At my request, the armorer analyzed the Sith lightsaber that I'd recovered from Wud Mortull. She confirmed that his lightsaber contained synthetic crystals, as did every other Sith lightsaber she ever examined.*

*Still, when I think of that wicked smile on Wud's face, I have difficulty dismissing the feeling that his weapon exerted some kind of control over him, driving him to do terrible things. I suspect I am guilty of wishful thinking. It is easier for me to believe that a red crystal turned Wud to evil than that he took that path all by himself.*



## 1000 bby

*I am Seviss Vaa, Sith Lord and trusted servant of Lord Kaan. I have studied many ancient texts, including Naga Sadow's writings on Sith alchemy, and have visited the ruins of several Sith temples.*

*You wish to know about the worlds of the Sith Empire? There were many, well over one hundred that were habitable, and the Sith controlled the riches of a thousand species. Under Lord Kaan's guidance, we shall undoubtedly reclaim all these planets, and many more! My research is ongoing, but I will share what I know of the major worlds.*

*The best-known planet is Korriban in the Horuset system, the ancestral home of the Sith. An arid, desert planet, Korriban is the tombworld of Sith Lords and the former power base of the Sith Order. The massive temples that were carved out of the rocky cliff walls of Korriban's Valley of the Dark Lords contain the mummified remains of the most illustrious Sith Lords, as well as treasures that remain well protected by ferocious creatures and intricate traps. Because the power of the dark side transcends the simple biological functions and spatial fluctuations of existence, it is not surprising that Korriban is home to many restless spirits.*

*But Korriban was not always a necropolis. Long before the arrival of the Jedi Exiles, it was the homeworld of the ancient Sith civilization. More than twenty-five thousand years ago, the Sith were unified by the long-lived King Adas, who led the revolt against Rakata invaders and subsequently acquired Rakatan technology. Although the Sith were victorious under King Adas's rule, Korriban was so devastated by the Rakata that most Sith chose to relocate to Ziost.*

*During the relocation, Ziost was a thickly forested world, but it eventually yielded to an ice age that leveled the vast woodlands as well as most evidence of civilization. The towering Sith Citadel is among the few remaining structures, and it was adopted as the central meeting place for the original Sith Lords, those Exiles of the Jedi Order who found their way to Sith space following the Hundred-Year War.*

*According to records, the Sith Lords might have gained greater knowledge of their subjects from an ancient Sith library temple on Krayiss II. Apparently, this library housed Holocrons and artifacts about the Sith species, but ruins on Krayiss II have yet to be identified as a library, and its collections may have long turned to dust. Would Lord Kaan have allowed that? I think not!*

*Although the Sith species were experienced builders of monumental architecture, they certainly benefited from the instruction of the Sith Lords. Travelers of Sith space will find significant Sith temples on various worlds, including some in the Thule and Thurra systems. So far, I have shared my knowledge of these temples with only Lord Kaan. If you can convince me of your sincere devotion to the Sith, I might be persuaded to provide coordinates for one of these temples, but be advised that most expeditions result in fatalities.*

*The Sith Lord Ludo Kressh's private fortress was on the Sith world Rhelg. Kressh's rival for the title of Dark Lord of the Sith was Naga Sadow, who had a fortress on Khar Delba, but also kept a secret stronghold in a crater on Khar Delba's moon, Khar Shian. According to legend, Sadow's lunar stronghold was his primary fortress, and the Khar Delba structure merely served as a decoy to Kressh's attacking forces. Sadow must have preferred locations where sunlight never reached, for both his former properties can only be visited with an ample supply of glow rods. Those who venture to explore these dark environs may gain nothing more than a better appreciation for ancient construction methods, but I personally found the Khar Shian ruins to be extremely enlightening.*

*Just prior to the Great Hyperspace War, the Sith Lord Garu lost or abandoned the Holocron of King Adas on the planet Ashas Ree. This was the same Holocron that was eventually recovered by the renegade Jedi Freedon Nadd, and which helped him conquer the planet Onderon. I have yet to visit Ashas Ree, but various Sith texts stress*

*that it is an insignificant world. Tragically, many once prominent Sith worlds—including Ziost, Khar Delba, and Khar Shian—went the way of Ashas Ree, as all were largely stripped of their relics by Republic forces after the Great Hyperspace War. Perhaps the greatest loss during that period was Veeshas Tuwan, an ancient Sith library on the Sith world Arkania. For destroying our history, all Jedi deserve the most painful death Lord Kaan can conceive!*

*Since the formation of the Brotherhood of Darkness, many worlds have become sites for Sith training. Those with noticeable but limited ability in the Force are sent to Honoghr, Gentes, or Gamorr to become Sith Warriors or Marauders. There they learn to channel their emotions into mindless rage and battle fury. Our alchemists transform them into ravaging beasts of destruction to let loose upon our enemies.*

*Those with greater ability are sent to Ryloth, Umbara, and Nar Shaddaa. These students learn to use the dark side for secrecy, deception, and manipulation. Those who survive the intense training become unstoppable assassins who can use the dark side to kill their targets without moving a muscle.*

*Both Dathomir and Iridonia currently have Sith academies where apprentices study under Sith Masters. Successful trainees become the counterparts to the Jedi Knights, and swell the ranks of our armies. But just as the Jedi Knights must answer to their Jedi Masters, so do our own adepts and acolytes answer to the Sith Lords. Those with the potential to become Sith Lords are trained on Korriban.*

*Duty calls, but I will speak of more worlds at my earliest opportunity. Long live the Brotherhood!*

## **Darkness Shared**

By Bill Slavicsek

*A galaxy far, far away, six months before the Battle of Ruusan...*

The *Golden Song* rode the shifting currents of color and light through hyperspace, covering vast distances with each click of its onboard chronometer. Crian Maru sat rigid in her chair, using every meditative exercise she knew to remain calm and in control. She wasn't sure how the Jedi Masters did it. They always looked so serene, so at peace. Perhaps she would eventually achieve such a constant state of quiet reflection and confidence, the conditions that she believed separated a Jedi Knight from a Jedi Master. But those were thoughts for another day. Now she had to prepare herself and her apprentice for the tests that lay ahead of them, while she tried to come to grips with the horror they had left behind.



Under the light of Harpori's sun, Crian Maru and her apprentice had landed the *Golden Song*. What was supposed to be a bustling Duros colony was silent and still. No one had come to greet them. The town square had been deserted. When Crian reached into the Force, all she sensed was sadness. All she felt was emptiness. Behind this emptiness lurked darkness.

The transport shuddered, and with a sudden shift in the stars, the journey through hyperspace came to an end. Crian tried to block out the images of Harpori. Slaughtered Duros adorned with the unmistakable wounds of a lightsaber. Men, women, and children massacred to appease the dark hunger and churning anger of the Marauder. The Madman. The Dark Killer.

With a deep, calming breath, the Jedi Knight banished the haunting images, at least for the moment. It was time to finish the job they had set out to do. They had to face the darkness. He was close, their quarry. Within this star system. Crian could feel his sinister presence in the Force. It was not a feeling she appreciated.

"Where are we, Dree?" Crian asked her Padawan learner. The young Rodian, Dree Vandap -- barely more than a child -- was reviewing the *Golden Song's* nav computer display, anticipating her teacher's request. "Still in the Mid Rim," Dree said, "A system called Balowa." Dree frowned in the Rodian fashion, crinkling her snout. She absently shook her head crest. "I see nothing out here."

"He's here," Crian said, adjusting the controls and engaging the ship's sublight thrusters. "Check the sensors, and be mindful for vibrations in the Force. It will tell you more than machines and computers ever will, if you listen to its song."

For Crian, the Force was like a constant melody that had been with her for as long as she could remember. It washed over the Jedi Knight like waves of sensation that few others could feel, an omnipresent hum that was at once grand and complex, simple and comforting, full of movement yet totally still. When she was at peace, she could feel the Force resonate within her. Like the echoes of a beloved song. That was how Crian perceived it. Other Jedi explained it differently. Her Master had described it as an omnipresent mist that swirled and drifted constantly around him. Dree described it as a still pond; when it rippled, it told her things.

Crian closed her eyes, letting the Force guide her hands as they moved over the transport's controls. The song reverberated within her, changing, building. Now it was thunderous and cacophonous. Crian could sense the Dark One in the Force, could hear the terrible rhythm that made him tangible to her Jedi senses. His presence was full of anger. It vibrated with barely controlled rage.

He was coming.

The Marauder.

The Madman.

Kaox Krul.

\* \* \*

The Marauder slipped his ship into the transport's wake, riding the thrust of its sublight drive like some sleek ocean predator angling for the kill. He was Kaox Krul, proud warrior of the Brotherhood of Darkness, devoted follower of Kaan, the Dark Lord of the Sith. A great war was about to erupt, pitting the hate-fueled believers in the dark side of the Force against the weak-willed Jedi who preached the hypocrisy of peace and tranquillity. The Jedi claimed they never felt the raw wind of rage as it screamed through their blood. *Liars!* They denied the dark side, refused to harness its power. They made rules to stop others from accepting that strength if they so desired. How Kaox hated the Jedi and the sanctimony they preached.

This one, the human woman, had been hounding Kaox for more than a month. It was time to end their little game. He had to return to Lord Kaan's side. He could sense his Master's summons in the Force, and he could not resist the beckoning much longer. Lord Kaan was calling them all, the entire Brotherhood. The war of dark against light was about to begin. But Kaox had one more thing to accomplish before he returned to his Master.

The hunting transport moved in a deliberate search pattern, sliding closer and closer to a small, uninhabited world. Kaox didn't bother to check his nav computer; the Force told him that the unnamed planet teemed with life, none of it more advanced than a womp rat. There was nothing in this system to concern

him. The Jedi were alone, without any possibility of assistance. *Soon*, Kaox thought, *they would be dead*.

The Marauder pushed his starfighter into an attack vector and powered up his weapons system. The transport was in his sights -- a slow, lumbering creature about to be ripped asunder by the fast predator swooping up behind it. He would have preferred to kill the Jedi and her apprentice in close combat, lightsaber against lightsaber, but the time for such contests had passed. He reached into the Force, pictured the transport exploding into a thousand fiery shards. He let his anger rise within him, filling him with rage and power. Now the Force was a crimson sheen before his eyes, bathing the transport in a targeting haze that would increase his accuracy and ensure the killing shot. Kaox triggered the starfighter's laser cannons, and bolts of energized death streaked toward the unsuspecting prey.

\* \* \*

The Dark Killer had slipped behind them like a shadow. She felt his savage presence a fraction of a second before Dree cried out. Crian suppressed a smile. Her Padawan was very good, but now was not the time to tell her so. Instead her hands danced over the controls, coaxing the sluggish transport to veer from its current course before the Marauder's lasers burned through their hull or sliced open their sublight engines.

"Dree, hang on to something!" Crian commanded as the *Golden Song* shook and groaned. With stern resistance -- and a token measure of defiance -- the transport rolled slowly to one side. Crian grimaced and hoped it would hold together.

"The Marauder is right behind us!" Dree shouted. "Closing fast ..."

The explosion that ripped through the transport drowned out Dree's voice. She might have finished her sentence, but Crian couldn't hear the words over the noise of the laser strike and the blaring alarms that warned her of a dozen imminent systems failures. The *Golden Song* was locked in a spin. As smoke poured into the cockpit, Crian frowned and fought the controls. Then, with a crash and a powerful jolt, the lights snapped out, leaving the Jedi Knight and her Padawan in total darkness.

\* \* \*

Kaox Krul felt his starfighter shudder as lances of laser fire erupted from its forward-mounted cannons. He used the dark side to aim true, pinpointing the precise spot where the lasers would rip through the transport's engines. His elation was momentary at best, however, because the transport had dodged the fatal fire. The insipid Jedi had sensed his presence! There could be no other answer. His prey slid to the right, a maneuver far too ambitious and daring for such a lumbering craft. The Marauder's lasers sliced into the belly of the transport, carving a wound that bled atmosphere from the left ventral portion of its hull. Kaox leered. It wasn't the killing blow he had foreseen, but it was damaging nonetheless.

As the transport fell into an uncontrolled spin, Kaox realized with some alarm that his starfighter was too close. He had wanted to fly through the explosion, scattering the remaining shards of the transport in his passing as he sent the Jedi and her apprentice to their Final Jump. But there was no explosion, and the spinning transport's nose struck the starfighter a solid blow. The Jedi's ship hit the Marauder like a charging nerf plowing into a ripclaw.

Kaox's consciousness fled as the starfighter bounced away and fell toward the small planet below.

\* \* \*

The transport tumbled end over end.

While Crian hoped that fate had spelled the end of the Marauder, she didn't believe that Kaox Krul could be dispatched so easily. The darkness was still out there. Regardless, she had more immediate problems. The *Golden Song* spiraled toward the small planet that had greeted the Jedi shortly after they had emerged from hyperspace. Now it filled the viewport as Crian struggled to regain control of the vessel.

"Dree, what can you tell me about that planet?"

There was no response. Crian could sense nothing more than an impression of the Rodian Padawan. Dree was alive and probably unconscious. Anything else Crian imagined was purely speculation, and she didn't have time for that. The

planet was coming up fast, and she still couldn't get the transport to respond to her commands.

"Come on," Crian urged the ship. "Your namesake is supposed to bring good luck and fortune. I could use a little of both right about now."

The *Golden Song* hit the planet's atmosphere hard. Crian could feel the ship breaking apart around her. "A little help here," Crian whispered, willing the stabilizers to come back online or the repulsorlift engine to kick in. She hit the repulsor toggle again. Nothing. Once more.

There was a recalcitrant groan from somewhere deep in the transport. Suddenly, it was slowing, trying to level out. The repulsors were working! That was something, anyway. She might not be able to get the *Golden Song* up into space again, but maybe she could lead it relatively gently to the surface of the planet.

It wasn't going to be a pretty landing, Crian knew. The transport rocked back and forth as the repulsors pushed against the planet's surface. With great trepidation, the ship fought the clutches of gravity as it punched through the exosphere into the ionosphere, sliced across the stratosphere, and plunged into the sky. A weird realization came to Crian as she imagined the ship confronting its own destiny with a mixture of trepidation and valor, and it made her sad. The *Golden Song* had made its last journey. Their beautiful, faithful transport was diving to its death.

The transport raked the treetops, cutting a swath through the leafy canopy before plunging into the sea of dense foliage. It hit the ground, bounced off its repulsorfield, and bounced again. Through the cracked viewport, Crian saw impenetrable forest. The transport slid across a clearing and plowed into the base of a massive tree trunk, and then Crian saw nothing at all.

\* \* \*

Kaox's senses cleared as his starfighter skimmed across the planet's atmosphere. He struggled to attain a vector that would allow the ship to glide toward the planet's surface in a more or less controlled fall. He caught sight of the Jedi's transport as it plunged toward the dense forest canopy, then focused his attention on saving his own craft. The starfighter's nose had been crushed, rendering its sensor array useless. Kaox was certain that other systems had been

damaged as well, perhaps beyond repair, but he had engines and steering. He flew the starfighter toward the surface, looking for a place to set down.

Then he would head out on foot, locate the Jedi, and either dance on their dead bodies or finish the job -- up close, where he could carve them into small chunks.

\* \* \*

Dree Vandap knew she was alive because she hurt all over. A spirit on the Rodian Hunting World -- the place good Rodians go when they die -- couldn't hurt like this. At least, Dree had never heard of such a thing in any of the stories she had read. She hadn't been raised in the Rodian tradition, though, so there were probably a lot of things about Rodian theology that she didn't know. She grew up in the Jedi Temple, where she learned the ways of the Jedi from teachers such as Lord Hoth and Crian Maru. The Jedi didn't follow the Path of the Hunt, but Dree had read about her homeworld and the Rodian traditions. She felt that she had a good idea about the Hunting World and spirit hunters, and certainly no spirit that she had ever read about had a bruise the size of a shell-fruit on the side of its head.

The Padawan pushed aside the debris and stood up. The *Golden Song* was a ruin of shredded durasteel, melted plasteel, and exposed wiring. She loved this ship, but it was painfully obvious that it had flown its last mission. Thankfully, it hadn't been Dree's last mission as well.

"Just wait, Vandap," Dree muttered to herself, "the day isn't over yet."

The Rodian took a moment to assess the damage. It looked bad from the inside, but she didn't see anything that led her to believe she was in immediate danger. There was no fire, no sparking wires, no warning hum signalling a power cell overload. She stepped into a relatively clear spot on the tilted deck and checked that her lightsaber was still clipped to her belt. Then she remembered her Master.

"Master Crian?" Dree called out. Her voice was weaker and more frightened sounding than she had intended, so she called again, louder and -- she hoped -- with more confidence.

When she received no reply, Dree reached out with the Force. She probed the area, searching for any sign of her Master's presence in the Force. Dree wasn't very good at this sort of thing, though every Jedi had some rudimentary ability to sense vibrations in the Force. She concentrated, closed her eyes, and tried to open herself to the vibrations.

Nothing.

No, wait. There was something. Dree had a sense of impending doom. Death. The dark side. It made her convulse.

"Space this!" Dree muttered. She shook her head, clearing away the feeling. "I'll check on Crian the old-fashioned way."

She moved toward the forward part of the cabin, trying to ignore the shattered viewport and the crushed control panels. "Crian?" she called again, and she could feel the fear trying to well within her. Dree didn't let it.

Stepping over a piece of deck plating that had been ripped open, Dree saw Crian's boot sticking out from behind a twisted console. The Padawan took a deep breath to steady herself, then moved to her Master's side. She saw Crian lying there, and was unsure how to proceed. She didn't see any gaping wounds or obviously broken bones. There wasn't any blood pooling around her Master, but that didn't mean she wasn't hurt just the same. *Should I touch her*, Dree wondered, trying to remember the rudimentary medical training she had received a few years earlier. *Shake her? Call out her name until she answers?*

*But what if she's dead*, Dree asked herself. *She certainly won't respond if she's already dead.*

"I'm not dead," Crian said in a hoarse whisper, blinking her eyes open to look at her student.

Dree couldn't help herself. She jumped back, banging her elbow on a twisted bulkhead.

"Fine," Crian said in an amused tone, "Don't help your old Master."

"You're not old," Dree said, coming to Crian's side and helping her sit up. "But you certainly scared a few years off my life."

Crian sat still for a moment. She closed her eyes, and Dree knew that she was reaching out with the Force. When Crian opened her eyes, Dree could see determination and purpose within them. The Jedi rose to her feet, placing a hand on the lightsaber dangling at her side.

"We aren't finished yet," Crian said. "The Marauder is still out there, and he's searching for us."

"I guess that makes us the prey."

"For the moment, Little Hunter," Crian said affectionately. "Let's let him think of us that way for a while longer."

\* \* \*

Kaox Krul skulked through the forest like a stealthful prowler. His senses stretched before him, making him aware of every insect, plant and flower, every small creature that cowered in its burrow or fled as he approached. This world, its bountiful lower life-forms, had never seen the likes of the Marauder, and he fed upon the fear that his presence garnered. He was still too far away to get an accurate feeling, but Kaox imagined that the Jedi and her apprentice were experiencing the same kind of fear as the fur-covered burrowers and the small leaf-eaters. That fear would grow as he got closer, and he would draw strength from their dread.

He would relish it.

The Marauder kept a steady pace. He didn't worry that he would misstep or stumble. Such were the concerns of lesser beings. Stealth fell away like a tattered cloak, a serpent's skin. He envisioned his prey shuddering under thick blankets of fear.

He wore black body armor of his own design. It consisted of protective padding and composite plates crafted into an intricate pattern that glorified the Sith and the Brotherhood of Darkness. He had also used Sith alchemy to imbue the armor with dark side energy, creating a barrier that provided some protection against the abilities of the Jedi. He was proud of the work he had done, both the menial construction and the application of Sith magic, and he wore the armor as a symbol of his faith in the dark side of the Force.



At his side, clipped to his belt, hung the lightsaber that he had used to kill more than a hundred foes. Kaox hadn't constructed the weapon. He had earned the lightsaber, taking it from the still-grasping hand of the first Jedi he had killed in personal combat. He diminished the Jedi every time he used the weapon to strike down an innocent -- such as the pleading Duros he slaughtered at the Harpori colony -- or a despised foe the likes of that Jedi, Karist Dem, or the Wookiee diplomat Rojarra. The weapon, cleansed in blood and used as an instrument of the dark side, was completely Kaox's now. Barely any of the Jedi taint remained.

Kaox would use this weapon to kill the Jedi woman and her young apprentice. He saw the battle to come in his mind. He would start by testing the two of them together, allowing them to team up against him to reveal the cowardice that typified the Jedi. Then he would break away, give them time to wallow in their fear as they contemplated his greater strength and power. When he struck again, he would kill the apprentice. It wouldn't be a clean, swift kill. He wanted her to experience agony, to intensify her fear. She would call to her Master for help, but she would also realize that help would not reach her in time. When she knew that death had set upon her to feast, he would end her life. His actions would drive the Jedi crazy with grief and anger. Perhaps she would accept the truth of the dark side then, but he had not found that to be the case in the past. The Jedi were stubborn, closed-minded. She would come close to the truth of the Force, but she would back away from the power that might actually give her a fighting chance. And then the Jedi would die as well.

When it was over and his lightsaber's blade was powered down, Kaox Krul would return to Lord Kaan, triumphant and ready to carry on the next phase of the Brotherhood's rise to glory. The Jedi and her apprentice were simply appetizers before the bountiful feast of darkness to come.

The Marauder was hungry. He increased his pace, letting the dark side flow through him and increase his endurance. He replayed the scene he had imagined as he ran. The Marauder was very hungry.

\* \* \*

"We have to go," Crian Maru said, leaping down from the crumpled transport.  
"We have to go now."

Dree Vandap, a survival kit slung over her left shoulder, landed in the moist grass beside her Master. "Shouldn't we just go and face him? Get this over with?"

"The Marauder is powerful, Dree. Don't underestimate him. He knows that we've been following him since Harpori, and we've both felt his hatred -- his darkness -- through the Force. Something tells me that this isn't the place to confront him."

The Jedi and her apprentice ran to the back of the transport and examined the cargo bay door.

"The servomotors won't open that door. It's too badly mangled," Dree said.

"Then I'll have to improvise," Crian replied, drawing her lightsaber and igniting it with a practiced motion. Gripping the lightsaber with both hands, Crian sketched a rough circle in the durasteel door. The metal glowed white hot as the lightsaber sliced through it, then the portion Crian had cut away fell inward, granting access to the cargo compartment.

Crian jumped easily through the opening. "Keep watch," she called back. "We won't be alone for much longer."

\* \* \*

The Marauder watched the apprentice from his perch among the trees. He sensed that her Master was nearby, but Kaox couldn't see her. Was she still inside the wrecked transport? Or was she somewhere in the forest, waiting to strike at him while he went after the Rodian? Would the Jedi use her apprentice in that manner, as bait? He didn't think so, but sometimes the followers of the light surprised and confused him. He let the dark side swell inside him, using it to mask his own presence while simultaneously enhancing his senses to stay alert.

He glanced to each side, even though the Force revealed that he was alone in the trees. Then he unhooked his lightsaber from his belt and held it at the ready. He didn't like that he had lost sight of the Jedi. It made him uneasy. Had she anticipated his arrival? Was she more powerful than he had dared imagine? No matter. The dark side was his ally. Kaox would strike fast and strike hard. He would take no chances.

The apprentice would die. Now. Without warning. It wouldn't be as satisfying as the game he had imagined, so he would just have to amuse himself later, against the Jedi.

\* \* \*

Dree felt her heart beat fiercely in her chest. She was scared, and she couldn't help it. Her own ability to see into the Force, to feel its vibrations and read the patterns in the flow, was woefully inadequate compared to Crian Maru's. Even so, her intuition told her that there was a storm coming. A literal open-the-sky-and-let-loose-the-flood storm, full of lightning and wind and thunder. It would crawl across the sky like a great beast. She knew that before the first drop of rain hit the ground, the Marauder would be upon them. Her teacher sensed this, had warned her to be ready, and Dree tried to find her calm, her peace.

The Rodian slid her lightsaber from beneath her robes. It wasn't her lightsaber, not really. Someday, hopefully in the not-to-distant future, she would set out to build her own. She wasn't ready to take on that test, however. Not yet. Until then, she would use this one -- a gift from her mentor. Crian had given it to her the day she had accepted the young Rodian as her Padawan learner.

"Learn to use this well," she remembered Crian instructing her. Since that day, she had practiced with the weapon during every spare moment. She wanted to show Crian that she was serious about her studies, about her commitment. Dree wanted to prove that she had what it took to be a Jedi Knight.

Dree caught movement out of the corner of her eye. It was as though a shadow had disengaged itself from the forest and was moving toward her at lightspeed. She turned toward the dark blur, reacting with Jedi reflexes but still feeling like she was standing still. There was a loud hum as the shadow's lightsaber flared to life. Dree brought her own lightsaber up in a defensive position while extending its energy blade to its full length. She didn't think. She didn't run. Dree stood her ground and held her lightsaber before her.

The blur took shape. It was a large human with hair cropped so close to his scalp that he was practically bald. His powerful form was covered in black padded armor that stung her eyes when she looked at it. The symbols etched into the

armor resonated with the dark side. She had only seen him from a distance, but there was no mistaking this giant of a man.

It was the Marauder, Kaox Krul. He didn't say a word. His hatred screamed at her with words of dour silence. It clung to him like a shroud. Dree was aware that somewhere, in the distance, a dagger of lightning cut the sky. Her multifaceted eyes, however, were locked upon his lightsaber's blood-red blade. He held it high, its hilt almost too small for his huge hand. The blade cut a rainbow through the air as it arced toward her.

Dree was dead. For a moment, she was as sure of that fact as she was of her own name. But then her training took over. She caught the Marauder's energy blade on her own, sending sparks flying in all directions. Then, before he could counter her defense, Dree tumbled to the side, closer to the open cargo compartment and momentarily out of the Marauder's reach. She regained her feet in one fluid motion, drawing on the Force to lend strength to her arms and legs.

"Even Jedi whelps can surprise me," Kaox growled, taking a cautious step toward her. "But in the end, it's always the same. The Jedi whelp is dead, and I score another kill."

Dree tried to steady her voice, but she knew she was no match for the Marauder. "You have a lot of deaths to answer for," she said, keeping her lightsaber's blade in front of her.

"Perhaps, Jedi whelp, perhaps." He took another step toward her. "But I won't be answering to you."

Crian Maru exploded from the cargo compartment astride Dree's repulsorlift speeder bike, bounced across the open field, and made a sharp turn back toward the combatants. Gunning the thrusters, Crian let the bike lunge forward. She sent a command through the Force, mentally ordering her student to leap onto the bike as it passed by. Then she turned her complete attention to operating the speeder. She wasn't as good a pilot as Dree, so she had to try a bit harder.

Kaox Krul watched the speeder bike race toward him and smiled. Now he had both of the Jedi in his sights. He readied himself, preparing to strike as soon as the bike was close enough. *Perhaps this will be a challenge*, he thought.

\* \* \*

As soon as the Marauder turned his attention to Crian and the speeder bike, Dree began to move. She was midway through the tumble that would place her behind the dark-sider when she felt Crian's voice enter her mind.

"On!" the voice shouted.

Dree would obey, but she had to buy time. She finished her roll, bunched her legs beneath her, and leaped. Her jump carried her past the Marauder's exposed back. She slashed with the lightsaber, hoping to at least wound the dark-sider. Kaox Krul responded quickly and perceptively. Instead of slicing into the dark armor, Dree's blade bounced off the Marauder's ignited lightsaber.

The Marauder had to spin around to protect himself, so he wasn't able to avoid the speeder bike. It sideswiped him, knocking him prone.

Dree finished her leap, landing perfectly behind Crian on the moving vehicle.

Crian didn't slow. She turned the speeder away from the wreck of the *Golden Song* and pushed the thrusters to full. As they raced toward the forest, away from the Marauder, Dree could sense that Crian sought every advantage. She, not the Sith warrior, would choose the battleground. She would dictate how the conflict would be waged. The Rodian Padawan could sense that her Master wanted to frustrate their adversary at every turn.

Dree hoped that was enough of an edge.

\* \* \*

Kaox Krul rolled with the impact, rising instantly to his feet. He glanced around, saw that his lightsaber had fallen near the wrecked transport, and reached into the Force. He immediately found the invisible line that stretched between the lightsaber and his open hand. With a gesture, he plucked that line and the lightsaber returned to him. A few seconds had passed, but when he looked up the speeder bike was already disappearing into the forest.

"No!" Kaox shouted, his rage building. "I will not be denied this kill!"

Gathering the Force around him, the Marauder ran. Like a stroke of black lightning, he dashed across the clearing and into the depths of the forest,

following the speeder's path. The Force-powered burst of speed might not catch the Jedi's vehicle, but it would keep him close.

He opened himself to the dark side, impossibly increasing his speed even more.

\* \* \*

Dree held on to her Master as the speeder bike wove through the forest. She should be piloting the speeder. She was a better bike pilot than Crian, and navigating between these massive trees demanded keen instincts and sharp reflexes. There was no time to stop and switch places, however. The Marauder would be coming after them, and neither of them was ready for a fight. They had both been shaken up by the crash. Dree hurt in a few places, though she didn't think she had suffered anything more severe than a deep bruise. Crian might have more serious injuries.

As the speeder completed a complex series of twists and turns and settled back onto a more-or-less straight course, Dree risked a glance over her shoulder. Startled, she almost let go of her grip on her Master. The Marauder was right behind them! He must have cloaked himself in the dark side, because Crian didn't seem to have noticed his proximity. He was moving with Force-boosted speed and was almost upon them.

"He's here!" Dree shouted, her words whipped away by the roar of the speeder bike as it cleaved the wind.

Crian had sensed her student's anxiety a flickering instant before Dree spoke. She pressed the footpads that regulated the thrusters until they wouldn't move any further, and the speeder shot forward. *That had to be enough*, Dree thought. There just wasn't any more for the speeder to give.

The Marauder's face twisted with rage as he summoned even deeper reserves of dark-side energy to bring himself within a few scant meters of the bike's mortified passenger. Even with the Force, could he really keep up with them? His lightsaber flared to life and he swung at the speeder. The stroke made him lose his balance, and he tumbled feet over head and hit the ground hard.

The Marauder had struck his mark, the tip of his lightsaber blade sliced into one of the bike's power cables. The damage didn't prove immediately fatal, but the

speeder would run out of power at an increased rate. Dree sensed Crian's concern and shared it. Could they reach a relatively safe location?

Dree looked back once more, but the Marauder didn't seem to be pursuing them any longer. Perhaps his resolve had finally given out, as well.

\* \* \*

The dark clouds that had crept over the horizon earlier now filled the sky. Night was coming, and with the cloud cover it would be almost completely dark. The storm, when it hit, promised to be spectacular. Crian reached out into the Force. The dark presence was still there, but it wasn't close. At least not for the moment.

They had abandoned the speeder bike an hour earlier as its energy gauge dipped toward empty. Ditching the vehicle at the bottom of a deep ravine, they started running and kept their fevered pace until they had put a few additional kilometers behind them. When they reached the rocky hills that distinguished this part of the forest, Crian motioned for them to halt. They found a small cave, partially hidden by undergrowth, and settled inside it to rest.

"Will the storm come soon?" Dree asked.

"No," Crian replied, hearing the Force's song. "It's waiting."

They took turns keeping watch while the other tried to sleep. At best, they were able to slip into a fitful half-slumber, troubled by dark dreams and images of the Marauder. Most of the time, one or the other simply closed her eyes and tried to find some calm within the Force.

They ate rations from their survival packs and drank water from canteens. They didn't speak much, but each of them braced for the battle to come. The storm loomed threateningly but refused to spill its contents. The clouds above were dark and painfully bloated.

Time passed.

The Marauder drew closer.

And the storm waited with sinister anticipation.

\* \* \*

Crian remained vigilant as Dree slept, apparently, at least for the moment, unfettered by nightmares. Crian wondered whether she would have held her ground had her Padawan learner not been with her. She had faith in Dree, but the young Rodian still had much to learn. She wasn't ready to face the Marauder, not yet. Their survival would almost certainly fall to Crian, but she held secret doubts as to whether she was ready to face Kaox Krul. He was insane, powerful, full of the dark side, hungry for the kill. Rage had made him strong, fearless. Could she do it? Could she defeat the Marauder?

Yes, Crian thought. But it would be better if she didn't have to worry about her Padawan.

"Sleep well," Crian whispered, gently touching her student's forehead.

The Jedi Knight slipped out of the cave, into the cloud-shrouded night.

Behind her, in the cave, Dree Vandap rolled over and moaned. Her nightmares had returned.

\* \* \*

For almost two days, Kaox Krul tracked the Jedi through the forest. After trying to disable the speeder bike, he had lost his balance and fallen with a bonejarring crunch. It was a sloppy miscalculation, the result of moving too fast to stop his momentum. The wind had been knocked out of him. He swayed in and out of consciousness for several long minutes before he was able to resume the chase. By then, the speeder was gone and he didn't have the energy to attempt another burst of speed. So he started walking, maintaining a casual pace as he let his body recover from the extreme effort of running in the Force.

It took more than a day to reach the place where the speeder bike was hidden. It was half buried in a mountain of dead leaves and branches at the bottom of a scar-like trench. He almost strode past the ravine and probably would have missed it entirely had he been moving faster. These Jedi were certainly hard on their vehicles, Kaox mused.



He dropped into the ravine to examine the speeder. The Jedi weren't nearby, and Kaox hadn't expected something as mundane as a crash to hinder them. It appeared that the speeder bike had simply run out of energy.

He spent the next day following their trail into the forest. What began as a simple matter turned daunting as their trail suddenly disappeared. Kaox plumbed the dark side, urging it to illuminate the path the Jedi had taken. His prey had their own lifelines to the Force, however, and they had somehow masked their course. The Marauder could do nothing but wander the forest, looking for physical signs of their passage or wait for the Force to betray them.

Or for them to betray themselves.

Kaox hid himself from detection as the Jedi had done. *No, not both of them*, he realized. The apprentice wasn't experienced enough to have such fine control over the Force. It was the Knight who was shielding them, wasting valuable energy to mask herself and the young one. *Just another sign of weakness*, Kaox thought. Just another indication of why the dark side would eventually triumph over the light.

More time passed. Kaox Krul took a few hours to rest and meditate on the dark side.

When he was ready to move out again, he became a tireless predator, a relentless stalker. He paused, sniffed the air, and opened himself to the Force. There it was. A tingle, a subtle vibration. It wasn't much, but he had found his quarry. With a smile that was both disturbing and hateful, the Marauder moved in for the kill.

\* \* \*

Crian Maru slid through the forest like a quiet breeze. Overhead, the clouds parted just enough to reveal a patch of clear night sky. The planet's twin moons shone through the break, painting the forest in a pale, ghostly light. Her senses tingled like live wires as the Force coursed through her, but she couldn't locate the Marauder in the Force. He was hiding, though she still had a vague sense of being watched, even if she couldn't pinpoint the source of her trepidation.

She pressed her search, eventually stepping out of the trees into a large clearing. In the moonlight, she saw that a calm, still lake filled the open space. The twin orbs above were luminously reflected in the water. Crian noticed that the clouds were tearing apart, and now she could see stars in the deep blue expanse around the moons. Perhaps the storm was dying. If so, it was a good omen.

\* \* \*

Dree sat up in the cave, instantly awake and clear-headed. Crian was gone. She was alone in the small hollow. Crian had left her behind, had gone out to face the Marauder on her own.

*Did she think so little of me, of my abilities?* Dree wondered.

Part of her wanted to stay right where she was, safely hidden in this cave. She couldn't do that, though, not if she wanted to be true to herself and her Master. A Rodian hunter wouldn't cower, afraid, hidden in a cave. Certainly a Jedi Knight wouldn't. However, Dree was neither a Rodian hunter nor a Jedi Knight -- not yet. Fear, though, led to the dark side. She wouldn't take that path -- not willingly at least.

Dree steeled herself with a calming breath and set her mind for battle. Crian needed her help, and Dree wasn't going to disappoint her.

\* \* \*

Crian Maru, Jedi Knight, sat beside the quiet lake, under the glow of the twin moons. The heavy storm clouds framed the clearing, but the sky directly overhead was crisp and clear. She was calm, at peace. The Force's song vibrated through her, filling her with confidence and power. She was ready.

The shadow stood at the edge of the clearing, partially hidden by the thick clump of trees. She had been aware of the Dark One's presence for a few moments, but she made no move, gave no indication that she had spotted him. The shadow boiled out of the darkness, and in the pale glow of the moons' light, the Marauder was revealed. He moved toward her without a sound, waiting to ignite his lightsaber until the last possible moment. Crian decided not to wait.

The Jedi Knight stood without haste, calmly turning to face the onrushing darksider. He paused, momentarily confused by her unhurried actions. She drew her own weapon and locked her gaze with his.

"Your darkness betrays you, Kaox Krul," Crian said.

"And you deny the darkness within you, Jedi," Kaox retorted "Reject your Jedi oath and follow me to Lord Kaan's side."

"That will never happen."

"So you believe."

Two lightsabers flared to life. In the distance, thunder rumbled out of the clouds.

The storm was all around them, despite the clear sky above. Lightning flashed over the trees. *So much for a good omen*, Crian thought.

With the next clap of thunder, Kaox Krul roared. Crian Maru met his charge, lightsaber to lightsaber, dark side to light.

\* \* \*

Dree Vandap watched the battle between Jedi Knight and Sith warrior erupt, horrified and fascinated. Their energy blades carved intricate patterns in the night, punctuated by frequent sparks as the blades collided, drew apart, and collided again.

The Padawan allowed the Force to fill her, calling upon a battle-enhancement technique. She ignited her lightsaber, drawing comfort from the familiar *snap-hiss-hum* of the weapon. Then she charged across the open field, rushing toward the lakeshore to aid her Master.

\* \* \*

The Marauder and the Jedi danced to a life-or-death song only they could hear. It was a dance of violence that reverberated in the Force. The two combatants took each other's measure with the first series of strikes and counterstrikes. One gave ground, then took it back as they sliced and parried. More thunder, and then the wind picked up, swirling fallen leaves around them as they fought. For the Sith and the Jedi, time seemed to ebb and flow, each moment a complex

clash of Force-enhanced attacks and blocks that played out in a kind of slow motion.

The Sith warrior launched a deadly barrage of strikes at the Jedi. Crian pulled deeply from the Force and countered each one. She flipped and somersaulted, looking for weaknesses in his defenses. He spun and tumbled, probing her own technique for an opening. For a time, neither found one.

The young Rodian leaped into the fray then, striking at Kaox Krul from behind. He countered this attack, but now he bore an enemy on each side. He let his anger build. This gave him strength, allowed the dark side to blossom within him. His lightsaber twirled from one side to the other, blocking a strike from the Jedi here, parrying a swipe from the apprentice there. What he could not do from this position was launch a meaningful attack at either of them. To do so would be to give the other an opportunity.

Kaox Krul switched to a one-handed grip, leaving his left hand free. He balled his free hand into a fist, squeezing tight and imagining all of his anger slipping down his arm to pool there. He imagined it was a tightly wound spring. Then, when the Jedi's weapon bounced away from his parry, turning her slightly to one side, he opened his hand and unleashed the power that was concentrated therein. The Force spread out like a wave, striking the Jedi and knocking her backward, into the lake.

He called the Force to him again, let it surround him, and then he leaped. He was gone before the apprentice's weapon had barely begun its arc. By the time the energy blade passed through the place he had been, he landed softly behind her. His blood surged with triumph. The apprentice was off balance, just barely, but it was enough. He lashed out, the burning blade of his own weapon skewering the young Radian.

Crian Maru gathered the Force around her and used it to lift her out of the water. She floated to the shore just as the Force turned dark and cold around her. Dree Vandap was dead. Stunned, she watched as her apprentice slumped to the ground. Sorrow flooded her, and she couldn't hold back its flow. Anger rode in on these waves, as did a hatred the likes of which she could not remember ever experiencing. She had failed her student.

Dree was dead.

The Marauder had to die, too.

Crian saw Kaox Krul smile as she charged toward him. She knew she should control her emotions. She was on dangerous ground. *But Dree wasn't supposed to die!* Crian wanted to hurt the Marauder. She wanted to make him pay.

Lightsaber blades collided once more.

\* \* \*

Hours later, the Marauder and the Jedi were still locked in battle. They were too evenly matched for either to gain more than a temporary advantage. They hurled rocks and sticks on tendrils of Force. They sliced and slashed and hacked with lightsabers that hummed angrily at the continued exertion. They taunted each other when they could spare a breath. Punches, kicks, knees, and elbows, they pounded on each other with every weapon at their disposal.

Battered and bruised, covered in cuts and scratches, they both looked ready to drop. Even Kaox's dark armor had fallen apart in places. Whenever Crian felt her muscles weaken, she remembered her beloved student and found the strength to carry on. Where Kaox found such stamina, she had no clue.

The bloated clouds had returned, gathering into a singularly fearsome presence. Jagged streaks of lightning exploded from within as thunder crashed down with a terrible intensity. With every strike and parry, thunder peeled. With every punch and kick, lightning spread across the sky like fiery spider webs.

Crian was beginning to lose ground. She was faster than the Marauder, better trained, but he was stronger and called on reserves of the Force that were forbidden to her. He was going to kill her. He was going to win.

She knew where Kaox drew his power. The dark side of the Force. He wasn't afraid to let his emotions magnify his strength. He had no compunctions about using his anger and hatred as vessels to hold more power than his body or spirit could muster by themselves. He was a Sith warrior, trained to harness the intensity of his darker feelings. Crian parried another strike, then leaped out of the Marauder's reach. For a moment he didn't follow. He just stared after her, illuminated by the red glow of his lightsaber and the strobing bolts of lightning.

"I'm sorry, Dree," Crian said, letting the tears run down her sweat-stained cheeks.

Crian gave into her rage then, unleashing her hatred of the man who stood across from her. She let it sing inside her, a melody of unbridled fury that renewed her strength and determination. The clearing around the lake filled with the emanations of the dark side of the Force.

Kaox roared, giving himself completely to the dark side.

Crian returned the call, embracing her anger and hatred. The bloated clouds splattered the ground and the lake with huge drops of greasy rain. In the downpour, Crian and Kaox each called upon the dark side. Invigorated by its power, they launched themselves, one at the other, and their struggle became even more devastating.

Thunder boomed around the two opponents with each punch and kick and lightsaber clash. Lightning danced over the surface of the lake and lanced into the ground around the warriors. Crian slashed, her anger amplifying the force of her attack. Kaox dodged, whirled, and returned with a deft counterstroke. Lightsaber blades cracked and sparkled, bouncing off each other again and again, and still black rain fell from the sky.

The Marauder, hoping to find a moment's respite, wrapped himself in the Force and hovered over the center of the lake. Crian refused to give Kaox even a moment's respite and followed him into the air.

"Your anger is impressive," Kaox called over the howl of the storm. "Join our Brotherhood of Darkness and renounce the life you have already given up."

"You don't understand, do you?" Crian called back, hurling her anger at him through the Force, thrusting him down toward the churning water below.

He shrugged off the attack and fortified himself with the power of the dark side. Crian did the same.

"Time to die, Jedi," Kaox roared.

Sith and Jedi flew at each other, converging above the roiling cauldron of water. Kaox's lightsaber aimed high. Crian's blade thrust low. A lightning panorama

bathed them in harsh light for an instant as each was felled by the other's killing blow.

Then they were gone, lost behind torrential sheets of rain.

\* \* \*

Salen Toth, a Jedi Knight, stood on the shore of a stagnant lake. It was more swamp than lake, actually. The trees around it were twisted and black, with barren branches that reached like skeletal limbs toward the dark, muddy center. The whole place felt ill, deformed. Haunted.

"I found the Padawan," Salen said, speaking into his comlink. "She was killed by a single lightsaber strike. I haven't found any sign of Crian Maru or the Marauder, but I'm sure there was a battle here."

He looked out over the bleak lake, trying to make sense of what happened. All he found in the Force, though, was darkness and despair.

"I'm done here," he said, switching off the comlink.

This was a dead place. It was time for him to return to the living. He turned, lifted the body of the Padawan, and started back for his ship.

Behind him, the dank wind whistled through the twisted trees, and the shadows grew deeper. For a moment, he thought he heard the hum of lightsabers. He turned back, but there was nothing to see.

### **Nightfall On Ruusan**

*From "I, Corellian: Ruusan and Reformation"*

I found myself staring into gray infinity. Eventually I realized I was looking up into the sky, lying flat on my back between the rain and the mud.

Someone was watching me. I turned my head and looked at her.

The girl was sitting cross-legged on the hood of a crashed command skimmer, sheathed in black armor, tight-fitting and glossy with rain. She had a long polearm held casually across her lap, a lanvarok with a wicked bardiche blade.

Her hair hung in dark braids around her cheeks. Her bare shoulders were tan from outdoor living. Her eyes, when they found my gaze, were ebony, flecked with gold.

"You're still alive," she smiled, as if it was funny.

Now I remembered. I'd been her prisoner. My hands were still tied. Groaning, I sat up, and looked around.

The battlefield was empty. The knights and lords were all gone, leaving just the rain and mud—and a few survivors abandoned even by the dead. The broken hulks of armored vehicles still rested where they'd sunk into the mire, big guns pointing at the ground. And here and there, I could see slanted lances, damp, tattered pennons lifting in the wind.

But that was all.

The Republic cleaned the wreckage up afterwards, and carved a big memorial out of the cliff face in the Valley – a clumsy statement, a way for the real victors to impose the wrong meaning on the war. That evening, the wreckage looked beautiful.

Hauling myself up to my feet — *painfully* — I looked at her.

"Githany was right," the girl said, talking as much to the wind as to me. "She said Bane had kriffed Kaan's head, tricked him into this stupidity."

"Who's left?" I asked. It came out as a whisper.

"My lords are all gone," she said, not meeting my eyes. She held a tarnished Jedi comlink in her hand—*my* comlink. My lightsaber was on her hip. "Your Lord Farfalla seems to be in charge. He was far enough from the thought bomb, with his retinue. They say Lord Berethon's channel is still transmitting, but he's not answering"

"Farfalla?" I sighed, but the Force already told the truth – even to me. I looked around the battlefield and frowned. "What a waste."

"You think?" She gave me an ambiguous look.

"More than you could know," I replied.

She shivered slightly, but it was just the cold wind, a sign that night was coming.



“What now?” she asked.

“Let’s look for some way out of this mudpit.”

“You’re the slave here, *Jai*,” she reminded me. I shrugged my bound hands and started to walk. She could probably beat me in a straight fight, but I wasn’t in any mood for fighting, and I didn’t think she was either.

She hopped off her perch, hurrying to keep up.

“Don’t do that, slave,” she snapped. “It makes you look like you have some sort of plan.”

“What makes you think I don’t?” I asked.

“Jedi plans?” she asked, a wide sweep of her polearm taking in the ruin around us.

“Sith plans,” I said, and for a moment I felt some of the dangerous old fire.

She frowned for a moment. “You Jedi all just walked into the trap,” she said. “At least we did something with our deaths.”

“I’m still here,” I said. “So are you.”

She frowned again, and this time she kept quiet. I’d seen it a few times before, and I would see it a lot more—the mild confusion of a Sith soldier no longer in thrall to battle meditation.

I sometimes wonder if Jedi aren’t much different. We use battle meditation, too, but we assume we have a special exemption where delusions are concerned, because we’re on the right side.

She leaned on her polearm, watching me. “So where are we going? You want to find Lord Berethon?”

“The Lord Peregrine?” I asked her, in surprise. “You’ve heard of him?”

“Yeah, I hear he’s not a very good Jedi. You seemed to like him better than Farfalla, and I approve of that. I know Gith wanted him to join us.”

I laughed. “I tell you what—if I get you to Lord Berethon, you agree to release me and come under his protection.”

She tilted her head and looked at me, shifting her weight against the weapon.  
“You think he’d do that?”

“Yeah,” I said. “I think he would.”

“OK.” She shrugged, half-believing, and we walked on in silence. Overhead, the gray sky grew darker.

“Have you ever heard of Thon, the Master of Ambria?” I asked, as the rain eased.

“Should I have? I was in the battle there, last year.”

“He was a Jedi Master, three thousand years ago. He taught that the connection between light and dark was just the Force flowing, no different than the simple stuff about levitating rocks — something basic, true, and interesting.”

“What happened to him?”

“You’ve seen Lake Natth, right? Thon created that, as a work of art.”

She looked at me, disbelieving. “But it’s a dark-side focus....”

“Thon thought it looked pretty in the mountains, apparently. And then there are the Miraluka. They worship Light and Dark together, believe them to be inseparable, like lovers. There are a lot of great Miraluka Jedi.”

Her eyes narrowed. “Do you believe that, *Jai* boy? About Light and Dark?”

“Nope. Not in a doctrinal way, anyway.” Near the horizon the setting sun had broken through the clouds. “I think that looks pretty, though.”

She gave me a sideways glance. “Maybe the Masters all just read the doctrines the wrong way, then?”

I couldn’t tell if she was teasing or not.

We walked on, as the stars came out overhead, turning the night to cool silver and shadow. I remember thinking that it was beautiful, and that her armor and the bare skin of her shoulders glinted like the steel and silk discarded around us. But I kept silent, and tried not to look at her too much.

“Do you have a name, *Jai* boy?” she asked eventually. Her smile hinted she was either starting to like me or planning to kill me. I couldn’t tell which. I wondered if she could.

I laughed, then stopped and looked at her.

“Cut my bonds and I’ll tell you,” I said. “I’m not going to run. Where would I run to?”

She looked at me doubtfully for a moment. Then the polearm flashed, and I was free. I rubbed my wrists, grimacing, then slowly looked up and held her gaze. She blinked back.

“Sorry,” I said with my best grin. “I’m Lord Berethon.”

It didn’t sound nearly as impressive out loud as it had in my head.

She looked disbelieving for a moment, then she laughed. Really laughed.

“You’re the Lord Peregrine...?! Oh, *fierfek*....”

I nodded. “I’m the King of Corellia. I was never much good as a Jedi, though.”

“I noticed.”

“I think I might try being king again.”

“You’d have made a worse Sith,” she said.

“Maybe. Come on. Let’s see if we can find a way off this rock.”

“I have your comlink,” she reminded me, holding out the battered handset.

“Don’t you have a fleet in orbit, or something?”

“Oh. Yes, I do. It’s been a hard day.”

Her look grew softer as I took the comlink. If it had still been day, I could have seen the color of her eyes.

“Just remember, Your Kingship—you promised to take care of me.”

I murmured something in agreement. “*Falcon*? You didn’t hear any of that, right?”

**1000 bby**

## **Bane of the Sith**

By Kevin J. Anderson

Like a thrown dagger seeking its target, the *Valcyn* stabbed through hyperspace, a lone survivor racing away from the site of the battlefield massacre.

All of the Sith Lords were dead after their last stand on Ruusan ... all except one. The insidious "thought bomb" set off in a glorious suicidal gesture by Sith Lord Kaan had also obliterated all of the Jedi Knights under Lord Hoth's command. Every Force-user on Ruusan had been annihilated, warriors both light and dark. But there were other Jedi Knights abroad in the Republic -- and now the Brotherhood of Darkness was extinct. Except for Darth Bane.

"You are a coward," said a hollow spectral voice beside him, loud and hot in the closeness of the sleek ship's cockpit. "You have failed me and Lord Kaan and all your Sith brothers."

His knuckles white as he gripped the controls of the *Valcyn*, Darth Bane curled back his lips, showing clenched teeth. His eyes were wide and hunted as he navigated through the convolutions of hyperspace, fleeing toward what he hoped would be a refuge ... and a new beginning.

Beside him, occupying no space inside the blade-shaped spacecraft, sat the avatar of Sith Lord Qordis, a man wrapped in shadows. He crackled with black dark side energy -- the evil residue of a dead man.

Qordis turned his long ghoulish face toward Bane. His eyes were embers of fire wreathed within inky hollows. The specter pointed an accusing talon-like finger at Darth Bane. Reflections of his remembered obsidian-encrusted rings glittered in the cabin light.

"No, Master Qordis," Bane said, a large man hunched in the cockpit. "I am not craven. I have done only what was required. Someone had to escape, so that the flames of dark lore would not be extinguished completely." His head was shaved smooth, his scalp blotched with discolorations. Bane's jaw was firm and square,

his eyes as large as lanterns. His body was muscular enough to intimidate any foe, but the accusing spirit of his Sith Master made even the burly Sith Lord's resolve turn to cold water.

"You abandoned us, Darth Bane."

"No, I intended only to protect the legacy of the Sith! I must carry on the work of Darkness, or else all of our existence, the entire Brotherhood, will be forgotten." Trying to concentrate on his ship despite the looming presence beside him, Bane studied the coordinates. He worked the *Valcyn's* controls, and the ship plunged out of hyperspace, as if a surreal vacuum had broken around it. The slim spacecraft dropped into star-studded blackness, circling downward with its own momentum, augmented by powerful thrusters.

Darth Bane descended into the harsh, bright light of the Onderon sun. In this solar system, only one planet was habitable -- Onderon itself -- and it held a grouping of four erratic moons, including the beast moon of Dxun.

There, perhaps, he could redeem himself and mitigate this disaster.

Bane pressed his cold lips together, muttering quietly as he wrestled with his guilt. He had told Lord Kaan the folly of his "thought bomb" plan, had disagreed with the tactics of such complete and destructive surrender. On the blasted and corpse-strewn battlefields of Ruusan, he had argued against the mass suicide of the Sith Brotherhood, even if it meant dealing such a blow to the Jedi Knights. A poor bargain, he had insisted, raising a gloved fist inside the war pavilions where the angry and wounded Dark Lords thought only of revenge against his comrades.

But, as they had done for so long, the Sith followers were more interested in their private squabbles, trying to step on each other's shoulders merely to gain status for themselves. Didn't they see what they were doing to their glorious dark dreams? Darth Bane had watched it happen. Even while the Brotherhood of Darkness faced total defeat at Ruusan, still they were more interested in personal glory than in uniting against the common enemy.

They had been vanquished for their folly. Bane was glad to be away from fools with too much power ...

"Excuses and self-justification," said the ghostly avatar of the dead Lord Qordis, who had been annihilated on Ruusan, like all the others. "You were always a disappointment as a student, Bane. My other trainees followed orders, but you questioned too much. You refused to do what was necessary, and you never bothered to finish your training." Qordis seemed to grow larger, until the *Valcyn's* cockpit could no longer contain the angry spirit. "Now how will you complete your mission?"

"I always do what is necessary, for my survival and for the benefit of the Sith," Bane muttered. "But none of you would listen to me." The *Valcyn* plowed through interplanetary space, cutting its way toward Dxun, where Bane hoped to find a new future for the Sith. "Now you are all dead, and at last I have a chance to recreate the Sith in the proper way."

The leprous green moon hung directly within his navigational circle. Though squeezed and cracked by tidal stresses, Dxun was overgrown with a cancerous covering of wild life-forms, twisted jungles infested with predatory creatures more horrific than any Jedi Knight could ever imagine. Bane had heard of the moon's long dark side history and hoped to find a place of refuge here on Dxun.

When he looked beside him, he saw that the specter of Lord Qordis had vanished. He breathed a sigh of relief as he began descending into the beast moon's gravity well, wondering where he would ever find a safe landing place in the nightmare of foliage below. His relief came too soon. "You will not get away unpunished!" Qordis's words boomed into Bane's mind. Sparks flew like fire geysers from the *Valcyn's* control panel. The engines gasped as if they'd been strangled, then gave out with a disheartening thunk. The damaged craft rattled and shuddered as it dropped through the air like a wedge-shaped stone. All the ship's systems had gone completely dead.

Bane struggled to reignite his thrusters, attempting to squeeze just a little more energy from the repulsorlifts. The hull heated to a cherry red as the *Valcyn* tore through Dxun's atmosphere. Lightning crackled around him. Storm explosions hurled his ship from side to side.

"Curse you, Lord Qordis," he said in a dry throat.

As the treetops rushed up at him, he fought back his panic, cast away his helplessness, and used a desperate snatch of Sith powers. The dark side energies buoyed his failing craft just enough so that it crashed into the treetops with slightly less than lethal force.

Branches splintered. Leaves burst into flames from the friction of his passage. The *Valcyn*'s hull tore open, shredded by the sharp boughs. Darth Bane shielded himself with all the Sith power he possessed, forming a cushion against the impact.

The *Valcyn* broke through the forest canopy and slammed into the soft, mucky ground. The careening spacecraft ripped a long furrow and uprooted trees and plants, setting them afire behind him.

When the ship finally came to rest, Darth Bane found himself intact, though the ship itself would require months to repair -- if he even had the capability at all. Weak, and yet revitalized by the very fact of his survival, Bane pried his way out of the damaged spacecraft. The smoking hull burned his fingers as he climbed free. He dropped to the uneven torn ground.

The lone survivor of the Sith carried a supply pack and his hook-handled lightsaber, nothing more. He stood with his hands on his hips, surveying the furious jungles of Dxun, and contemplated his next step. He would be here a while.

Lightning continued to roar overhead like shattering electric crystal. He stepped away from the crash site into slashing rain in the black of night. He didn't know where to go ... other than away from the ruined *Valcyn*. The beast moon seemed to be crouching and ready to spring.

Igniting his lightsaber, he trudged into the jungles, using the throbbing blade as a machete against the fang-clawed vines that writhed at him. He sliced through a thicket, but the foliage only grew denser, more resistant. His nostrils flared with anger as he strode forward, hacking with each step.

"You cannot hide out there, Bane."

He turned to see the avatar of Lord Qordis towering over him, ethereal yet vengeful. Bane lashed out at his dead teacher. "A Sith does not hide." He struck

furiously with the lightsaber again, clearing a large tree in a shower of sparks. "I feel no fear."

Behind him in the morass of undergrowth, a loud boom ripped through the jungle. A pillar of fire erupted, vaporizing more of the oily foliage. A shockwave from the exploding fuel cells and cracked engine core flattened the forest for a hundred meters around. Smoking shrapnel, hunks of metal hull plates hammered around Bane like a meteor shower. Now, nothing remained of his damaged ship but a smoldering crater sizzling in the cold rain.

Angry, Darth Bane turned to the smug dark side avatar. "I see you don't intend to make this easy for me."

"I intend to make it deadly for you." The evil spirit barked a harsh laugh, then dissolved into the jungle shadows.

Bane shored up his determination and pointedly refused to look back as he pushed into the wilderness of Dxun. He thrashed through the jungle, which never seemed to give him three steps without fighting back. The ground beneath his feet trembled from the moon's tidal instabilities. Ominous hunting noises filled the jungle, and Bane remained on his guard. He knew the dark and bloody history of this place and was aware of his own peril.

Eons ago, the beast moon of Dxun had shifted in its erratic orbit until it came dangerously close to the parent planet. During the first grazing encounters, the atmospheres of Dxun and Onderon touched and joined, allowing the hideous flying creatures of Dxun to travel across the bridge and fall upon the unsuspecting primitive people of Onderon. The beasts preyed upon the helpless humans, slaughtering them, until the survivors learned to protect themselves. The humans invented weapons, fortified their villages, and trained their fighters to kill the venomous beasts.

As the moon continued on its orbit, the atmospheres separated again. But once each year they touched, and more monsters could journey to the feeding grounds on Onderon. Centuries later, after the Onderon civilization had developed in response to the horrible stresses, the orbits finally shifted again, freeing Onderon from the deadly kiss of Dxun. But the cities remained fortified,



the culture continued to be warlike, and some of the leaders had schooled themselves in the dark side.

The once-great Freedon Nadd had ruled here for a time, and the ancient nobles, King Ommin and Queen Amanoa, had also used Sith secrets to cement their rule. Ommin and Amanoa had been entombed beside Freedon Nadd here on the beast moon. Years later Exar Kun, the Dark Lord of the Sith who had first resurrected the Sith Brotherhood, also came to Dxun, raiding Nadd's ancient tomb in search of dark side secrets.

Darth Bane knew there must be more to gain from this tainted, sinister place ...

Light as a feather, yet moving with an assassin's power and grace, a sleek feline creature dropped out of the gnarled branches above. The creature was a dynamo of muscles, claws, and fur.

Though he was astonished that the predator could creep up on him so easily, Bane's dark side senses tingled at the last moment. He dove aside, avoiding the lethal blow, but still the impact of the panther-like creature knocked him to the ground. Crashing through stiff branches, Bane rolled away, bringing up his lightsaber.

The feline predator had steel-gray fur interleaved with tiny bronze scales that gave it a reptilian shimmer. Its claws swept the air in a fist of swords, but Bane danced backward, dodging the blow. The panther-thing leaped again, and this time its double tails thrashed, both of them smashing into a tree trunk with a sizzling impact.

Bane dodged again and saw that the panther's two tails were each tipped with a long, hooked stinger swollen with a bulbous end. Where the stingers had torn holes into the tree trunk, corrosive venom ate a blackened, smoldering hole through the bark and the heartwood.

Narrowing his eyes, Bane felt the dark side energy build around him. He clasped the handle of his lightsaber. The panther-creature bared its long fangs and yowled, but it did not back away as Bane slashed the energy blade back and forth.

Rain continued to sheet down in steaming sparks off of the blazing lightsaber. The panther-thing crouched on its haunches, its wiry muscles coiling. Bane could sense the beast's thoughts, knew when it was going to spring -- and as the monster lunged into the air like a torpedo of fur, scales, claws, and fangs, Bane struck with his lightsaber, sweeping the blade upward in a powerful arc. He eviscerated the monster, splitting it open between its twin poisonous tails and curving sideways so that the smoking blade came out of the panther-thing's powerful shoulder.

The squirming creature flopped to the ground, thrashing like two pieces of frying meat. Bane took a deep breath as he watched the light fade from the demon's eyes, saw its claws flex and twitch.

As in the crash of the *Valcyn*, once again he emerged without a scratch. He heaved a lungful of the sour-smelling jungle air, detecting the electric ozone from his lightsaber blade, the singed fur and bubbling flesh of the slaughtered monster.

Bane snarled a bestial cry of his own into the jungle shadows. "You brought that upon me!" He expected his teacher Qordis to appear again, laughing at him. But instead of the vengeful dark avatar, he saw the shadowy spirit of Sith Lord Kaan, the fallen leader of the Brotherhood of Darkness who had annihilated the Sith and the Jedi on Ruusan.

The Sith Lord's voice was resonant and powerful, as always, but calm. He bowed his shadowy head toward the slaughtered creature lying in the underbrush. "It is a predator. It can think only of hunger and blood. It doesn't care whether you are good or evil, Darth Bane. It simply wanted to feed." The avatar backed away. "Come."

Without brushing aside a leaf or a twig, the ominous spirit strode into the jungle, gesturing after him. But before Bane could follow, Lord Kaan had vanished into the darkness. Intent now, Darth Bane fought his way deeper into the wilderness, trying to trace Lord Kaan's path, but still not knowing where he intended to go, where the dark side would lead him. Resinous vines thrashed at him, but he shouldered them aside. Thorns clawed at his face, but he did not let the scratches or the blood inconvenience him. His lightsaber made the air smell of burnt sap and smoking green wood.

He called up his Sith abilities, letting his mind expand to encompass the festering evil, the brooding potential power available to him. Though under the tutelage of Lord Qordis, Bane had never finished his training. He had listened to other instructors, studied some of the ancient writings, but there was much about the dark side he had yet to learn.

Now, Bane had no choice but to teach himself, and he had the incentive to achieve Sith skills. He hoped Kaan's avatar would assist him, but even without its sinister aid, Bane would do everything possible to resurrect the Sith Brotherhood.

Disoriented in the dense undergrowth, he trudged for hours in the direction that the shimmering spirit of Lord Kaan had gone. He followed his instincts like a compass directing him toward the concentration of dark side energies, a powerful well-spring that had long lurked on Dxun.

When he did not see the avatars again, he wondered if the evil specters had abandoned him. He didn't think so. They were just waiting and watching, letting Darth Bane make the next move ...

He hacked away at a dead black tree, its leafless branches drooping like clawed fingers, its bark covered with scabrous encrustations of fungus. When the broken tree toppled, Bane stepped forward under the driving rain into a small opening where even the grass had turned brown and withered. A geometric structure stood there, a pyramid with uneven planes and incorrect angles, made of a dull metal like a giant block of armor.

Bane stopped, his mouth open. He sucked in a heavy breath of the moist, fetid air. He had heard of this place, knew it to be a focus of dark side power: the tomb of Freedon Nadd, a hidden structure meant to hold the evil energies that had infected the bodies of legendary dark Force-users. The pyramid was a reliquary of lost artifacts and information that would recall the lost wonders of the Sith. It was a chance for the Brotherhood of Darkness to start again -- under his own terms. Now things would change under his stern vision.

Feeling energy tingle in his every step, Bane crept into the clearing. His lightsaber hummed and crackled as if eager to draw him forward. His skin felt electrified with the power of this place. The ruined, overgrown tomb of Freedon Nadd

seemed to attract the lightning and the rain. Bane stood in front of the structure, looking up at the sheer metal sides, at the stained and corroded walls of Mandalorian iron. The lost crypt had been breached thousands of years before, broken open by some other plunderer -- Exar Kun, perhaps -- and left exposed to the vicious elements on Dxun.

Crouched inside the overhanging shelter of the broken doorway, he rested, exhausted from his ordeal -- first the flight from Ruusan, then the crash-landing on Dxun, and now the long and difficult trek through the jungle. He used a glimmer of his Sith power to summon fire and built a blaze from dead wood. The harsh orange and yellow light flickered and fought against the gloom.

Bane drew strength from the shadows around him. He seemed to hear whispering voices, a potential ready to explode here in the tomb. And yet he took comfort. "Here I will find my heritage. The evil in this place is resounding."

Outside in the clearing, the rain droplets sheeted through the shadowy image of Lord Kaan as if he wasn't there. "The evil is in you, Darth Bane -- as it should be. If you went to the shining towers of Cinnagar, or the plush chambers of Coruscant, or the rich savannas of Thule, the evil would still be within you."

Bane listened and smiled.

Kaan continued, "You are a seed. Will you let the Sith Brotherhood grow ... or wither?"

Revitalized, he ignited his lightsaber again. Using it as a torch, he passed into the tomb of Freedon Nadd, ready to explore. The dripping passages around him were made of thick stone walls, slimed with green moss. The floor was covered with a film of decayed leaves and vegetation that had blown in over the centuries. Brittle bones of rodents and the crisp shells of dead insects were strewn in the corners. Though he saw many signs of death, he noticed no scuttling spiders, no living creatures at all. It was as if the tomb of Freedon Nadd had swallowed all the lifeforce, holding it like a battery.

He encountered blind chambers and sealed rooms, three broken sarcophagi where tomb robbers had stolen bodies or jewels, though Bane suspected that any thief foolish enough to raid a Sith crypt had probably died a horrible death not long afterward ...

At corners in the winding passages, the ethereal specter of Lord Kaan led him onward, guiding him through the labyrinth. Bane did not question his former leader; he simply followed as anticipation swelled within him.

At last, Kaan stood outside a small chamber, his eyes blazing with dreadful fire. The alcove walls seemed wet and reflective. On the floor, as if someone had carelessly tossed it there, lay a jagged pyramid with starlike protrusions and sinuous hieroglyphics.

Bane pushed his lightsaber through the doorway so that the crackling glow of the energy blade illuminated the stone-walled room. "Is that a Sith holocron?" He looked in amazement at the shade of Lord Kaan.

"That object contains all the answers you desire, all the training and instruction you will need to master the secrets of the Sith. A wealth of information."

"It is all the wealth I need," Bane said, his voice no more than a cold breath.

By the shimmering light of his weapon, he saw that the air inside the chamber was threaded with strands of silvery, sticky webs. Rounded encrustations like armored barnacles plated the low ceiling. The alcove had a claustrophobic and brooding aura, and Bane hesitated.

"In there, you must take the holocron," Kaan's booming voice insisted.

Pushing aside his doubts, Darth Bane entered the chamber, knocking aside the gossamer webs. He stood looking down at the vital holocron, awed.

Above him, he heard a wet movement, a slurping sound, and looked up to see the rounded encrustations shifting about as if wakened by his presence. Gelid strands drooled down like thin droplets of saliva. He ducked as one of the barnacle-things released its grip on the ceiling and dropped onto him.

He knocked the hard shell aside, then slapped at another sailing barnacle with his lightsaber. Amazingly, though it ricocheted away, the encrustation was not destroyed by the energy blade.

The barnacle-things began to rain down from the ceiling in greater numbers. One struck him on the left shoulder blade, and instantly the shell fastened itself to his

flesh, as if it were a gigantic sucker. It acid-burned through the fabric of Bane's thick garment and sealed itself to the meat of his back.

The agony was indescribable.

He screamed and thrashed, trying to claw the encrustation from his shoulder. He arched his back and looked up just in time to see a larger object fall to the center of his chest, instantly fastening there with an unbelievable grip.

Bane shouted with the pain and wrenched at it, but the barnacle-creature had already eaten through his chest and seared into his pectorals, welding itself to his breastbone. He pulled and tugged, but the parasite stuck tight.

The remaining creatures burbled and moved about on the ceiling, anticipating. Still holding his lightsaber in one hand, Bane yanked out the black-bladed dagger from his waist. The razor-sharp knife glinted in the sickly light of the tomb chamber. He stabbed at the barnacle-creature, but the blade bounced off the parasite's shell, making no mark. Gritting his teeth, Bane slashed at his own skin to peel away his flesh from the edges of the thick, living encrustation. Dark blood welled up, and he cut deeper, digging with the knife's black tip to pry the creature off.

To his astonishment, though, as he made the incision, Bane watched the wound seal itself together, healing within moments. The pain remained, a stinging, throbbing sensation through his nerves.

"You led me here!" he shouted, looking for the avatar of Lord Kaan. "You lured me into this chamber." He used his fist and the blunt hilt of his dagger to pound the armored creature, but he felt somewhat stronger now, rejuvenated -- and betrayed. "What are these things?"

Now Lord Qordis appeared within the tomb, his black avatar rippling beside the shadow of Kaan. "They are called *orbalisks*," Qordis said, his face twisting into a smirk. "In time, you will come to realize the advantages of such symbiotes."

Lord Kaan spoke, his voice like iron, unsympathetic. "They are a small price, Bane -- are you willing to pay nothing to achieve your destiny?"

On the ceiling of the alcove, the orbalisks continued to simmer and move, but they left him alone now that he was infested. Fire burned through his skin from

his chest and his shoulder where the parasitic barnacles increased their hold on his body, digging deeper, securing themselves.

Darth Bane clenched his teeth and sneered at the specters of Kaan and Qordis. In their dark eyes he found the strength to suppress the pain. He picked up the Sith holocron. The ancient relic waited for him, calling out evil promises. There were no longer any obstacles in his way.

He switched off his lightsaber blade, realizing that he could see and sense everything in the chamber. He knelt on the cold, slimy floor, ignoring the orbalisks above and everything else on Dxun. He hunched over the holocron and held it in his hands amid the dripping opalescent webs.

He activated the holocron and felt as if he were falling into an unending pit of wonders, information ... and opportunities. He sat all alone, lost in the amazing library of darkness ...

Entranced and inspired by the knowledge he drank from the Sith holocron, Darth Bane paid no heed to the time that passed while he huddled in the dank chamber of Freedon Nadd's tomb.

Later, much later, he emerged, his body stiff and sore, his mind aching and overfilled with secrets. He made his way back through the narrow, claustrophobic passages of the crypt and stepped out into the rank air of the beast moon.

The storm had passed, and the ground had dried. Many days must have gone by, but Bane felt neither weak nor hungry. He blinked. Even in the smoky, hazy light of Dxun, he had to hood his vision. He grasped the cold iron wall of the tomb to steady himself. Looking down at his chest, he saw that the puckered, scaly orbalisk had begun to bud, spreading out around the fringes in a larger area across his chest. No doubt the other one was also spreading on his back. Eventually, they would probably cover his body. Though the barnacle-like creatures were feeding on him, growing to cover more of his skin surface, the parasites were also pumping him with adrenaline and strength. This was a symbiotic relationship based on dark side energies, and now -- after he had absorbed the knowledge within the Sith holocron -- Darth Bane knew there would be enough dark side power for them all.

He stepped into the jungle clearing, away from the shadow of the ancient crypt. Bane thought of all he had learned and recalled the epic defeat of the Sith Lords at the Battle of Ruusan. No one had listened to him. The other Sith Brothers had fought among themselves rather than planning a strategic victory over their true foes. Bane realized the fundamental flaw in the old Brotherhood of Darkness. Now that he alone remained, now that he was the seed that would cause the new tree of evil to flourish, he decided that no longer would the Sith be composed of great armies attempting to overwhelm civilization through brute force. He had had enough of Lord Qordis's chest-pounding bravado or Lord Kaan's "rule by the strong." Such overt militarism against the Jedi Knights had failed miserably at Ruusan.

From now on, the Sith would depend on secrecy, working behind the scenes to eat away at the foundation of the Republic's government. With the Sith nearly extinct, weakened to the point of ineffectuality, Bane decided that the study of dark lore must go underground. He would hide and work in the shadows of society, using all he had learned from the holocron.

For now, he would also establish an unbreakable new rule to prevent the internecine feuds and civil wars that had stolen victory from the Sith grasp. There must be only two Sith at any one time: a master and apprentice. The two of them would learn the dark side intimately, and they would become brilliant puppeteers to manipulate the fools in the Republic.

But he was stranded here on Dxun. The giant planet Onderon rode high in the sky across the gulf of space, close yet impossibly far. The avatar of Lord Qordis had destroyed his ship, and now Bane was all alone, probably the only living human on the beast moon.

Standing in the clearing, collecting his thoughts, Bane heard a shriek in the sky. A gigantic winged form swooped down from the smear of dark clouds, spotting him with the razor eye of a raptor sighting in on fresh prey.

Bane instinctively grabbed his lightsaber, snugged the hooked handle against his wrist, and powered on the blade. The pterodactyl-like creature dove, its thin olive skin stretched taut along a bony framework, making its wings like jagged kites. The beast had a smashed-in face and a mouth full of protruding fangs. The



black eyes were tiny and close-set, and the maw opened wide as its long, triangular wings flapped and maneuvered.

Bane slashed with his lightsaber, but the flying creature raked sideways with its dangling talons, huge arced scythes at the ends of its feet. The claws scored across Darth Bane's chest, a move that would have torn any other victim to shreds. Though Bane was sent sprawling to the ground, the clustered orbalisks gave him enough strength and armor so that the flying monster caused him no harm.

Feeling invincible, Bane stood, brushing the shreds of his uniform away, feeling the hard plate of the orbalisks. He squared his shoulders and held his lightsaber as the beast circled in for the kill. At first, Bane considered slaying the monster, smashing it to a pulp with his newfound Sith powers -- but instead, he summoned his skills and stopped the beast in the air, driving it to the ground.

It flapped its wings, extending hooked claws, grasping and thrashing with its taloned feet. But Bane dominated the monster, forcing it to the still-damp ground. He continued to exert dark side pressure, and finally, with a grunt and an explosion of foul-smelling breath, the flying beast submitted. It bent its knobby knees and bowed its long neck down in front of Freedon Nadd's tomb.

Bane studied the creature for a moment. Then, like the fabled ancient beast-riders of Onderon, he climbed onto the flying monster's back, ready to ride off. This was a good omen, a sign for his future, and Darth Bane smiled.

He yanked at the flying beast's neck, and it flapped its leathery wings, raising him into the heavy air. It spat and thrashed, but finally relented to the presence of the Sith Lord on its back. Bane rode his new mount.

Now that he understood the depths of Sith powers, he thought he might even have control over worlds and moons, able to play with orbits and gravity like a child might play with colored balls.

Long ago, Dxun had grazed the planet Onderon, close enough that it was possible for creatures to pass across the conjoined atmosphere. Perhaps Bane could nudge the beast moon close enough so that he could travel to the nearby planet that filled the sky. In bloodshed and chaos, Darth Bane would go to Onderon ... and there he would find his apprentice.

## Darth Bane recordings

*I am not a man of words. But I respect the power of words, for that is what transformed me. The words of the Sith Code. Others had heard them, contemplated them, and so on. But I understood them, and they changed me. For what was I before I heard those words?*

*Nothing.*

*Just another miner on Apatros. Just a target for my father's rage. My name was Dessel, but because my father regarded me as the bane of his existence, he called me Bane.*

*I was eighteen years of age when he last unleashed himself on me. Broke my nose, my father did. Also knocked out two teeth, blackened both of my eyes, and cracked my ribs. I took it all without a word. Only after he passed out in a drunken stupor did I have the strength to wish him dead. But oh, how I wished so strongly. And then I passed out myself.*

*I awoke to find my wish had come true. The authorities ruled it a natural death. A heart attack, brought on by a combination of too much alcohol, a life working in the mines, and the overexertion of nearly beating his own son to death with his bare hands. I didn't realize at the time that my wish had been granted by the power of the dark side, by way of the darkness within myself. For then, I did not know of the dark side, and barely knew of the Force. I did not have that knowledge. I did not have those words.*

*But I did have the power.*

*I was twenty-three, working as a miner on Apatros for the Outer Rim Oreworks*

*Company, when one night I fell into a card game with spacers at a cantina. They talked of the war between the Jedi and the Sith, the Jedi general Hoth against the Brotherhood of Darkness. I had heard plenty of wild tales of Jedi performing extraordinary feats through the mystical power of the Force. I figured they were legend and myth, or at least exaggerations. Granted, I had had premonitions in my youth, visions that came true, so I knew there were powers that transcended the physical world. But the stories of what the Jedi could do seemed too impossible to believe.*

*Listening to those spacers, I wasn't convinced that the Sith were monsters. Bad things happen on both sides during any war. As far as I knew, the Sith were people, just like you. Just like me. And I didn't go along with the Jedi belief that all beings are created equal. After all, some beings are smarter or stronger than others. And for all that Jedi talk about helping those in need, it didn't change the fact that a Jedi had never saved me from any injustice.*

*That same night, I played sabacc with a Republic ensign who turned out to be a bad loser. When I left the cantina, the ensign and two naval soldiers attacked me. It was dark, so dark that I could barely see a thing, but I somehow saw the vibroblade coming at me. I saw it clearly, as if it glowed with an inner fire. I knew this was strange, because vibroblades don't emit light. It was the ensign who was holding the weapon. I grabbed his wrist and forced the blade straight into his chest.*

*The two soldiers fled. I knew they would report me to the authorities, that it would be their word against mine, and that no one would believe I had acted in self-defense. I had no interest in going to prison. I left Apatros immediately, and I joined the Brotherhood of Darkness.*

*I started off as a Sith trooper with the Gloom Walkers unit. I first saw action on Kashyyyk, and was promoted to sergeant after we conquered the planet. On Kashyyyk, and later on Trandosha and Phasera, I became more aware of my special abilities that enabled me to survive against apparently impossible odds, but I did not know the source of these abilities. I also became aware that my superior officer was a coward and a fool.*

*After a year of service, my talents came to the attention of the leaders of the Brotherhood of Darkness, and I was transferred to the Sith Academy on Korriban to learn the ways of the Sith. It was there that I first learned that the Sith, like the Jedi, also drew power from the Force, and that it was this power that had sustained me through so many battles.*

*Many students took new names for themselves on Korriban, leaving their old lives behind. I took what had once made me weak and used it to make myself strong. I took the name Bane.*

*At the Sith Academy, I learned the Code of the Sith. Others may have spoken the words with conviction, but I found meaning in them that others could not even imagine. At times, I believed the words were meant for me alone. Eventually, my belief would prove valid.*

*When I wasn't learning from the Masters and training with weapons, I visited what passed for the Sith archives, housed in a crumbling temple. The Jedi had long ago eradicated many teaching tools of the dark side, and the library was limited to scrolls, tomes, and manuals. I spent several hours each day studying these records. I found them fascinating, and felt that the ancient knowledge would be the key to unlocking my full potential.*

*Through these works, my understanding of the Force took shape.*

*Kaan, the founder of the Brotherhood of Darkness, believed that strength lay in numbers. But as our war against the Jedi continued, my studies led to the conclusion that the Brotherhood, having amassed an army of thousands, had thinned the power of the dark side. When Kaan, hoping to heighten morale and increase solidarity, conferred the title of Dark Lord to all the Sith Masters, I was the only one who protested. These so-called Lords could no more be equals than the billions of beings whom the Jedi were unable to protect.*

*Because the title of Dark Lord had been trivialized, I proclaimed myself Darth Bane. I had been told that the Darth title was no longer used because it promoted rivalry among the Sith and gave the Jedi an easy target. Obviously, Kaan and his minions were all cowards.*

*And so I gave Lord Kaan a detailed description of one of the most fearsome creations of the ancient Sith: the thought bomb, a ritual that would unleash the pure destructive energy of the dark side to consume all Force-users within a wide radius, trapping their energy within an ovoid shell. I gave instructions for the thought bomb to Kaan because I knew he would eventually use it against the Jedi, even though it would also mean an end to the Brotherhood. Aided by his fellow Lords, Kaan created and detonated the thought bomb at the final Battle of Ruusan.*

*I was the only Sith to survive the cataclysm, but not the only Force-user. Zannah was a young girl, one of the many children whom the Jedi had brought to Ruusan in their last, desperate efforts to vanquish the Sith. She would become my apprentice, Darth Zannah.*



*The power of the dark side cannot be dispersed among the masses. It must be concentrated in the few who are worthy of the honor. The Sith must be ruled by a single leader: the very embodiment of the strength and power of the dark side. If the leader grows weak, another must rise to seize the mantle. To serve this one true Sith Master, there can be only one true apprentice.*

*Two there should be; no more, no less. One to embody the power, the other to crave it.*

*The Rule of Two.*

*I am Darth Revan, Dark Lord of the Sith.*

*Those who use the dark side are also bound to serve it. To understand this is to understand the underlying philosophy of the Sith.*

*The dark side offers power for power's sake. You must crave it. Covet it. You must seek power above all else, with no reservation or hesitation.*

*The Force will change you. It will transform you. Some fear this change. The teachings of the Jedi are focused on fighting and controlling this transformation. That is why those who serve the light are limited in what they can accomplish.*

*True power can come only to those who embrace the transformation. There can be no compromise. Mercy, compassion, loyalty: all these things will prevent you from claiming what is rightfully yours.*

*Those who follow the dark side must cast aside these conceits. Those who do not—those who try to walk the path of moderation—will fail, dragged down by their own weakness.*

*Those who accept the power of the dark side must also accept the challenge of holding on to it. By its very nature, the dark side invites rivalry and strife. This is the greatest strength of the Sith; it culls the weak from our order. Yet this rivalry can also be our greatest weakness. The strong must be careful lest they be overwhelmed by the ambitions of those beneath them working in concert. Any Master who instructs more than one apprentice in the ways of the dark side is a fool. In time, the apprentices will unite their strength and overthrow the Master. It is inevitable. Axiomatic. That is why each Master must have only one student.*

*This is also the reason there can only be one Dark Lord. The Sith must be ruled by a single leader: the very embodiment of the strength and power of the dark side. If the leader grows weak, another must rise to seize the mantle. The strong rule; the weak are meant to serve. This is the way it must be.*

*My time here is ended. Take what I have taught you and use it well.*

Boda Bass recording

580 B.B.Y.

Author: Bodo Baas

*After many years of planning and preparations, I regret our diplomatic mission to Yanibar failed to convince the Zeison Sha of the Jedi Order's sincere hope that we might join forces. They remain cautious and distrustful of us, and only reluctantly welcomed us after we agreed that we would not attempt to meet their children unless adult Zeison Sha were present.*

*In fact, the Zeison Sha made it quite clear that they oppose the concept of separating Force-sensitive infants and children from their families. Their philosophy is so centered on being able to take care of oneself and one's family, and even I must admit that most Jedi, myself included, cannot entirely comprehend this form of devotion.*

*They did allow us to observe a Zeison Sha training session. I had heard that Zeison Sha are masters of the telekinetic powers, but I was astonished to see that their abilities in this area far surpass those of many Jedi. Not only do they use their telekinetic powers with apparently effortless ease, but they are also able to somehow wrap the Force around their bodies so that they can resist damage from harmful objects. Most remarkable.*

*Interestingly, they eschew energy weapons for something they call a discblade, a small metal circle with handgrips on the top and bottom; four thin, curved blades protrude from the circle's sides. The Zeison Sha warriors throw their discblades with extreme precision, and use the Force to return the weapon to their waiting hands.*

*I inquired whether their philosophy of self-reliance caused any losses to the dark side, and the Zeison Sha representatives acknowledged there had been some.*

*With all respect to their order, I pointed out that self-sufficiency can quickly turn to selfishness, and that incredible feats of telekinetic skill more often lend themselves well to attack rather than defense. Hearing my words, one of the of the younger Zeison Sha warriors, a Twi'lek female, stepped forward and said, "If not for self-reliance, our ancestors would have died shortly after your ancestors left them here."*

*Because this warrior's elders did not reprimand her, I could only assume they agreed with her assessment. Despite the Jedi Order's hope to reconcile, it seems that the Zeison Sha are determined to remain independent.*



Shortly after our failed diplomatic mission to Yanibar, we learned that a Matukai named Mendor Typhoons and two of his apprentices had defeated a gang of pirates near Ord Radama. A meeting was arranged in Ord Radama's orbit, and upon meeting Typhoons, I sensed he was a being with a good sense of humor. The way he smiled when he said that he felt that the Jedi method of teaching the Force was both elitist and ineffectual, and that he thought he could do a better job of training students than the Jedi Order could, he was so inoffensive and charming that I thought

he was making himself the object of a self-deprecating joke. But he wasn't. He was serious. And I suddenly realized that he and his apprentices were even less interested in allying with the Jedi than the Zeison Sha.

Because the Matukai generally draw from a pool of Force-users who would not qualify for Jedi training in the first place, I believe we should be content to let the Matukai exist as an autonomous organization, provided that they continue to steer clear of the dark side.

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232 bby

### Reidi Artom Recording

It seems the Jedi and the Republic forgot about the Cularin system until nearly three centuries ago, when the near-human explorer Reidi Artom rediscovered Cularin and visited Almas. An entry from Artom's logbook, dated 232 B.B.Y., provides a vivid description of her view of the Sith fortress from orbit:

*Circling over the fourth planet, I am coming toward a devastated wasteland. A few greenish purple plants grow here, but that's it. In the center, part of a building protrudes from the ground. The exposed portion is about thirty meters tall with a dome on the top. Sensors say there's more of the structure below the ground. There's something strange about the place. I can feel it, even from here. A Jedi would say that the Force is strong in this place. I don't know about that, but it sure is creepy. The green-purple grasses don't grow anywhere near it.*

*The structure is made from some kind of stone, all black. There aren't any entrances or windows of any kind as far as I can see. Sensors cannot penetrate the interior. Whatever it is, someone else is going to have to find out. I'm going to follow a hunch and not land.*

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*The Al'Har system—of which Haruun Kal is the sole planet—lies on the nexus of several hyperspace lanes: the hub of a wheel called the Gevarno Loop, whose spokes join the Separatist systems of Killisu, Jutrand, Loposi, and the Gevarno Cluster with Opari, Ventran, and Ch'manss—all loyalist. Due to local stellar configurations and the mass sensitivities of modern hyperdrives, any ship traveling from one of these systems to another can cut several standard days off its journey by coming through Al'Har, even counting the daylong realspace transit of the system itself.*

*None of these systems has any vast strategic value—but the Republic has lost too many systems to secession to risk losing any to conquest. Control of the Al'Har nexus offers control of the whole region. It was decided that Haruun Kal is worth the Council's attention—and not solely for its military uses.*

*In the Temple Archives are reports of the Jedi anthropologists who studied the Korun tribes. They have a theory that a Jedi spacecraft may have made a forced landing there, perhaps thousands of years ago during the turmoil of the Sith War, when so many Jedi were lost to history. There are several varieties of fungi native to the jungles of Haruun Kal that eat metals and silicates; a ship that could not lift off again immediately would be grounded forever, and comm equipment would be equally vulnerable. The ancestors of the Korunnai, the anthropologists believe, were these shipwrecked Jedi.*

*This is their best explanation for a curious genetic fact: all Korunnai can touch the Force.*

*The true explanation may be simpler: we have to. Those who cannot use the Force do not long survive. Humans can't live in those jungles; the Korunnai survive by following their grasser herds. Grassers, great six-limbed behemoths, tear down the jungle with their forehands and massive jaws. Their name comes from the grassy meadows that are left in their wake. It is in those meadows that the Korunnai make their precarious lives. The grassers protect the Korunnai from the jungle; the Korunnai, in turn—with their Force-bonded companions, the fierce akk dogs—protect the grassers.*

*When the Jedi anthropologists were ready to depart, they had asked the elders of ghôsh Windu if they might take with them a child to train in the Jedi arts, thus recovering the Force talents of the Korunnai to serve the peace of the galaxy.*

*That would be me.*

*I was an infant, an orphan, called by the name of my ghôsh, for my parents had been taken by the jungle before my naming day. I was six months old. The choice was made for me.*

*I've never minded.*

100 bby

### Master Asil Krimsan recording

*You are not the first student to ask me of the Potentium, and I doubt you'll be the last. It sounds so appealing, the idea that one does not require any study or practice to embrace and be a part of a benevolent energy field. But when one considers the history of the Force, all the many and various reasons why the Jedi understand there are definite divisions and pitfalls in life's tenure in space and time, one realizes that the Potentium view is ultimately selfish. It allows one to believe that one's actions are good and justified simply because there is no evil intent.*

*If you find any merit in this philosophy, be cautioned. This is not the way of the Jedi.*

*You might consider yourself a fair*

*person, even a good person, but do you believe all of your contemporaries consider you the same? Is there not one of your fellows who—from your perspective—has ever acted unkindly? Is it conceivable that at least one of your friends might not regard you as entirely benevolent and without any negative qualities?*

*Do you believe that you're as good as you will ever be? That you know all that you need to know? No, of course you do not, for you are already wise.*

*There is nothing wrong with questioning authority, history, and the nature of existence. But do not assume that all your questions can be answered by listening only to yourself and an energy field you've just begun to sense. You have much to learn, and much to learn about the Force.*

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97 bby

### Free Choice

*Truce At Bakura Sourcebook*

Eppie Antruse had never seen her parents this obdurate. Her father paced back and forth in front of the apartment's enormous view window. Behind him, Salis D'aar's rings of colorful streetlights glimmered through wind-whipped sheets of offspring rain.

"Ep, he's 30 years older than you. That might not matter now, but when you're 90 he'll be—"



"I've done the math for the next century." Eppie wanted to stamp on the floor tiles, but she was 31 Standard, too old for that. "We could still celebrate our hundredth anniversary. Easily."

"This is little more than a frontier world -"

"Our medical droids are as good as any in the Core. You can expect to see 200. You said so yourself-"

Eppie's mother stood in the kitchen's illuminated door arch, dressed in a long black nightrobe. "A 3D-year gap puts him in a different generation. You grew up in different circumstances. He's almost our age."

"He's a respected senator." Eppie crossed her arms, elbows out, defiant. "You wanted me to find someone respectable. You're probably surprised that he wants me."

Her parents glanced at each other. Guessing from laugh lines around her father's eyes, he was weakening. But her mother's chin stayed set. They wanted her to be happy. "He's got such a sparkle, Mother." She relaxed and let her voice show them how fond she was of Orn.

"Senatorships are hereditary," her mother said sternly. "It's not that respectable."

"You've said yourself that he's one Senator who hasn't vacillated every five years."

"True." Stopping near the door arch, her father elbowed her mother. "He's one who picked his course early and stuck with it."

"Through eight changes of government," snorted Eppie's mother. "What kind of job security is there in a senatorship?"

"I love him, Mother," Eppie said gently. "Even if there will be hardship down the line-"

"There will." Her mother folded her hands and eyed her gravely. Lit from all sides by archway panels and framed by the black robe, her face seemed to glow. "The older I get, the more I respect people over 60 who are still smiling. Life is hard, Eppie. You want someone who will make you happy enough to endure it."

"I've found him." Eppie spread her hands. Thinking of Orn made her feel as if she could hold the universe in them.

After several moments, her father slipped his arm around her mother's shoulders. "Our little girl has grown up."

Eppie's mother leaned against him and sighed. "I hope it lasts. But that's up to you and Orn."

**67bby**

### **The Tenebrous Way**

Dying, Tenebrous observed with mild surprise, was turning out to be not only pleasant, but wholly wonderful; had he ever suspected how much he'd enjoy the process, he wouldn't have wasted all these decades waiting for his foolish apprentice Plagueis to do him in.

So, even as he lay gasping around the icy barbs that pierced his lung, Tenebrous smiled. Even with the jerking and convulsing in his body's last reflexive rebellion against the fall of eternal night, even as organ systems shut down one by one to maintain the last shreds of light and life within the vast intricacies of his brain-massive beyond even those of other Biths, a people justly legendary for their intellectual prowess-Tenebrous found himself particularly enjoying the incremental disappearance of his own midi-chlorians.

His Force-perception was even more acute than the magnifying powers of his enormous eyes; in the Force, he could feel each individual midi-chlorian wink out in turn, a spreading wave of darkness, like stars eclipsed by the silhouette of an approaching ship.

Or falling through the event horizon of a black hole.

Ah, darkness. Darkness at last. The darkness he had dreamed of. The darkness he had planned for. The darkness that was his one true love. The darkness he had taken as his name.

Was he not Darth Tenebrous?

His vision dimmed. His hearing became a rush of wind like static on an electrovoder -and then silence. The sole sensation registered by his quivering flesh was the rip of shattered bone and slow suffocation choking his consciousness, as his shredded lung could supply only a fraction of the oxygen required by his massive brain.

It hardly mattered. Shielded from suffering by his command of the Force, Tenebrous observed the death agony of his physical form with appropriately Bithan dispassion. And now his impossibly refined perceptions detected the brush of Plagueis' mind, as the apprentice probed the vanishing midi-chlorians of his dying master with his own use of the Force, as Tenebrous had known he would. Tenebrous had spent decades making sure that Plagueis would be unable to resist doing exactly that.

Everything was proceeding according to plan.

\* \* \*

Foolish, pathetic Plagueis.... Tenebrous' Muun apprentice would never comprehend his own limitations. These limitations were only peripherally due to the unfortunate tendency of Muuns, as a species, to measure every interaction as a transaction to be manipulated for maximum profit. No, Plagueis' real weakness was fear. Fear so deep and all-pervasive that the fool did not even register it as emotion-again and again I across the decades of his apprenticeship, Plagueis had insisted that his fear was not fear at all, instead claiming it to be merely rational prudence. But Tenebrous knew the truth. Had always known it. Tenebrous had chosen his apprentice specifically because of it.

Plagueis was afraid to die.

Were Tenebrous the sort of individual who could experience pity, he supposed he might feel some for his apprentice. Crippled by dread, Plagueis would never know the freedom of an unbounded will that was the true legacy of the Banite Sith. And were Tenebrous the sort of individual to be fair-minded about such things, he would have accepted much of the blame for Plagueis' incapacity. As

both pity and fairness were entirely alien to his nature, though, Tenebrous instead pleurably recalled the relentless needling of his apprentice across their long, long years together. He had pricked constantly at Plagueis' sore spot, to make certain it could never heal.

Not even animals fear death, Plagueis. The lowliest beast in existence exhibits more "rational prudence" than you ever have. They fear only pain and injury. Bright lights and loud noises. You are less than a beast. You fear a mere concept-and one you do not even understand.

Thus was the ground carefully prepared. Thus did the seed of Plagueis' fear sprout and blossom into obsession. Thus had Tenebrous skillfully re-directed his apprentice's unparalleled aptitude for midi-chlorian manipulation away from the deepening of insight, from the intuition of the future, and from the amassing of personal and political power-away from any and all pursuits that might have proven inconvenient for Tenebrous' ultimate plan-toward a single goal. A goal Tenebrous had chosen for his own purposes.

The mastery of life and death.

More than a century before, when Tenebrous had been but a Sith apprentice himself, the magnificent computational power of his Bith brain had led him far beyond the simplistic Force studies imposed on him by his Master. He had always been far too intelligent to be seduced by the traditional Sith metaphysical twaddle of dark destiny and the witless fantasy of endless war against the equally witless Jedi Order. Soon he had confirmed to his own satisfaction that the dark side of the Force, far from being some malevolent mystic sentience bent on spreading suffering throughout the Galaxy, was in truth merely an energy source, and a tool with which he could impose his will upon reality. It was a sort of natural amplifier he could use to multiply the effectiveness of his many useful abilities.

None of which was more useful than his matchless intellect.

Like many Sith before him, he had turned his powers toward knowledge of the future. But unlike any Sith before him he had the enormous brain of his people, which combined sheer brute processing power with a level of analytic precision simply beyond the capacity of any other species. The future was always in

motion, and while other Sith struggled to foresee the faintest, least specific hints of what was to come, Tenebrous had no need to see the future.

He could calculate it.

While still merely an apprentice, his analysis had shown him the inevitable end of the Banite Sith and its preposterous Rule of Two. His calculations plainly indicated the coming of a shadow so vast it would darken the galaxy entirely- so vast it would mark the end of both Jedi and Sith as the universe had known them heretofore. The rise of the shadow would be the end of history itself.

Tenebrous had not the slightest doubt that the entire galaxy would measure time according to its arrival. Events would be marked by how far they had preceded the shadow, or by how long after it they followed.

Though the exact nature of the great shadow remained occult, the remorseless logic of his extrapolation detailed the coming destruction of the Banite system, and the rise of what would become known as the "One Sith." One Sith! The conclusion was so obvious as to require no confirmation: one single Sith Lord would arise of such power that he'd have no need of any apprentice nor fear of the Jedi. He would take and hold the galaxy by his own hand alone. Without an apprentice- or a Jedi Order-to destroy him, the One Sith would rule forever!

A heady prospect, with only a single drawback:

Tenebrous was not to be that Sith Lord.

His own death was clearly foretold, entirely inevitable, and it would precede the rise of the shadow by decades. His fate was explicit in the numbers, and numbers do not lie. However-as Tenebrous came eventually to realize over his many years of research, contemplation and calculation-it might be possible for the numbers in question to be, well, deceived....

The key, he'd discovered, lay in an obscure legend obliquely referenced in the Journal of the Whills, about a hero fairly typical in most cultures-the sort of promised future savior who appears in the foundational myths of nearly every developed society. What distinguished this particular savior from his run-of-the-mill equivalents was that he, according to four of eleven possible translations, was to be "born of pure Force." After three standard years devoted specifically

to exploring all possible permutations of the interpretation, Tenebrous determined that such a birth was indeed possible, at least metaphorically- "born of pure Force" could be read as indicating the creation of a living being through direct manipulation of midi-chlorian processes in an already living being.

And further, as Tenebrous discovered with rising excitement, such a being's Force potential might be limited not by its creator's own midi-chlorian count, but instead only by its creator's level of discipline and attention to detail. Indeed, his calculations indicated a range potentially far beyond his own. With proper execution, the "savior" might have a midi-chlorian count as high as fifteen thousand!

Perhaps even more.

It might be possible to create a being with the greatest Force potential ever recorded!

And-by the application of his own suitably subtle variation of the ancient Sith brute-force essence transfer-Tenebrous could ensure that his own consciousness would be present at the creation of this being, this savior, this Chosen One. And, at the moment of creation-long before the Chosen One could hope to resist-Tenebrous would seize it. Would become it.

With this single stroke, decades after his body's death, he would become the most powerful Force-user in the history of the galaxy.

It was all there in the numbers. He could not possibly fail.

Once his analysis had been parsed to its nth degree, polished into a gem perfect beyond the possibility of flaw, Tenebrous had devoted every second of every day of his life to fulfilling his plan. Nothing would be left to chance. He had exterminated his doddering Master with his customary efficiency, and had embarked immediately on a decades-spanning quest for an apprentice of his own. And not just an apprentice, but the apprentice: one possessed of a very specific combination of particular skills-primarily surrounding the direct perception and manipulation of midi-chlorian activity-but also a range of weaknesses, from short-sighted concern with personal profit to an unconquerable dread of the unknown realms beyond the walls of death.

An apprentice whose sole purpose was to create the being Tenebrous would become.

Thus would Darth Tenebrous, the greatest mind in the history of the Sith, be reborn to rule the galaxy.

Forever.

Now that his body's physical senses had altogether perished. Tenebrous found his perception of the Force to be proportionately heightened. With glorious precision, he could trace the slightest wisp of Plagueis' clumsy Force-probing as his apprentice sought to record and analyze every detail of Tenebrous's death. He could feel Plagueis himself: crouched nearby, his eyes closed, the long spiderish fingers of one hand stretched forth as though to snatch Tenebrous' disappearing midi-chlorians from mid-air.

This was Plagueis' customary technique: a close examination, through the Force, of the midi-chlorian decay that accompanied the physical death of his victims. Tenebrous was by far the most powerful Force-user whose death Plagueis had the opportunity to observe, and he had known all along that his apprentice would apply all his physical, mental, and Force capabilities-pitiful as they might be- to witness each slightest detail.

As though midi-chlorians somehow embodied the principle of life itself, they vanished as life fled. Plagueis had more than once speculated that they somehow migrated from dying cells and returned to rejoin the Force from which they had sprung-more evidence of the apprentice's muddy thinking and pathetically romanticized mysticism, but no matter. The delusion of the student had proven an inspiration to the teacher, and the concept of midi-chlorian migration-flawed though it was-became the key to Tenebrous- master stroke.

Amidst the billions upon billions of individual midi-chlorian deaths in Tenebrous' cells were a tiny fraction of midi-chlorians that were not dying.

That would not die so long as they inhabited a living host. These especially tenacious midi-chlorians-Tenebrous had privately labeled them with the indeed,

Tenebrous had gone to considerable trouble to ensure it would always remain so.

Instead of actually training his doltish apprentice, Tenebrous had flattered Plagueis' mysticism while pricking his insecurities, sending him off on one useless, doomed-to-fail mission after another. In turn, Tenebrous had invested every available second of the freedom this afforded into designing, creating, and deploying the one weapon that Plagueis would never suspect.

Could never suspect. His own prejudices about the Force ensured Plagueis wouldn't believe such a thing was possible.

Tenebrous created a retrovirus that could infect midi-chlorians.

Midi-chlorians were, after all, merely jesting sobriquet maxi-chlorians-had been altered. Improved. It would not be an overstatement, in Tenebrous' opinion, to use the word perfected. These maxi-chlorians would indeed migrate, but not into the Force.

They would migrate into Plagueis.

To detect this infinitesimal percentage would require the precision of a Bith; it was far beyond his apprentice's limited perceptions-and symbiotic organelles that contribute to the organic processes of the living cells they inhabit. Due to their role in Force interactions, altering them was singularly challenging-they had an unsettling tendency to spontaneously express unexpected and unfortunate side effects-but by applying the full analytic prowess of his vast Bith brain and the preternatural power of his Bith senses to detect and resolve sub-microscopic structure, he eventually succeeded in creating a retrovirus that would transform normal midi-chlorians into long-lived maxi-chlorians.

But that was only the beginning.

With the patient, painstaking attention to the slightest, most insignificant detail that was his hallmark, Tenebrous had encoded his custom retrovirus with his most potent weapon: his own consciousness.



Once completed, Tenebrous had released the virus into his own bloodstream. It had spread throughout his body, infecting midi-chlorians in every one of his cells with gratifying alacrity. Not all his midi-chlorians, though, as the infected maxi-chlorians no longer fully functioned; to infect them all would have cut off his own connection to the Force. A partial severance of this connection was a necessary sacrifice, however, and through an extended process of trial and error, he was able to fine-tune the effect and confine it to the one sector of his Force powers he no longer needed-his ability to sense the motion of the future.

Of what possible use was the ability to see a future he already knew?

Now, dead at last, he could begin to enjoy the fruits of his lifelong labor. In the Force, he could feel that his body had already suffered irreversible brain-death, yet his consciousness remained, fully aware, fully functional, and connected to the Force in a manner more intimate than he had ever believed possible. Freed now of the crude biological processes that mark the passage of time, Tenebrous found he could perceive the measured tick of each individual nanosecond while simultaneously comprehending the entire sweep of galactic eons.

Beside Tenebrous' corpse, as Plagueis carefully observed the vanishing of Tenebrous' midi-chlorians, maxi-chlorians were being subtly and invisibly carried across the intervening space to settle in Plagueis' eyes and mouth, on his skin and into an open wound on his back, where they entered the apprentice's bloodstream and slipped into his cells, releasing their viral cargo of Tenebrous' mind.

Perfect. And what made it even more perfect was that his apprentice would never comprehend the ironic pun of the name Tenebrous had given him: Plagueis.

The diseased one.

Driven by the dark side-powered will of the Sith Master, the retrovirus propagated with incredible speed. As it carried his consciousness throughout his apprentice's body, Tenebrous found himself becoming pleurably aware the he was gaining access to Plagueis' sensorium. He could literally feel what Plagueis felt, both the coldly clinical satisfaction at having successfully engineered

Tenebrous' murder.... and the Force-perception that let Plagueis monitor the last vanishing remnants of Tenebrous' uninfected midi-chlorians.

Full access to his apprentice's Force-perceptions! Delightful. Better than Tenebrous had allowed himself to hope. Hmm-perhaps he should have invested some time in actually training the foolish Muun. Tapping Plagueis' Force powers would be more entertaining if they weren't so stunted from disuse. And yet....

As he continued to explore, Tenebrous gradually became aware of the full range of his apprentice's connection to the Force, which was considerably deeper, broader, and more powerful than Tenebrous had ever suspected. He reflected, with a twinge of uncomfortable premonition, that perhaps Plagueis had been right when he contended that Tenebrous had always underestimated him.

Now Tenebrous touched upon his apprentice's powers of foresight, which were also vastly more developed than Tenebrous had believed. For a moment. Tenebrous found his perception cast far forward in time-to Plagueis' own death at the hands of his apprentice, who was himself visible only as a smear of darkness....

A shadow!

For an instant, Tenebrous felt the death anguish of Plagueis.... and felt the searing agony Plagueis felt.... at his failure to have ever created the Force-user Tenebrous was to become! He would allow his own apprentice to kill him too soon....

This could not be. It could not be contemplated, much less allowed to come to pass. Fury competed with panic as Tenebrous threw his mind at the future, seeking to understand how it was Plagueis could be so complacent, so foolish....

So blind.

The searing truth was driven home by the gathering darkness that clouded his borrowed foresight. Soon all he could see of the future was a hazy smear of shadow.... as the retrovirus he had become infected Plagueis' every cell. The retrovirus he had allowed to sacrifice his ability to gaze forward in time.... and had thus robbed his apprentice of his power to sense the future.

Which would seal his own doom as well.

His single-minded pursuit of eternal life and supreme power had accomplished only this. He would be destroyed by his own triumph.

Now wholly giving himself over to panic, Tenebrous turned his will upon undoing the damage he had done. With all his multiplied power, he yanked his maxi-chlorians back out from Plagueis' body in a spray of Force energy from his eyes, his mouth, the wound and every other cell. He had to think-he had to find a way out-or perhaps he didn't. Perhaps there

Perhaps the best he could hope for was the slow, inevitable extinction of his consciousness as his maxi-chlorians too faded and winked out. Then, at least, he would no longer have to squirm in the agony of his self-inflicted defeat....

If his maxi-chlorians were going to fade.

Because it dawned on him that he wasn't sure exactly how long the process should take, but he certainly didn't seem to be losing consciousness. He reached out with the Force-perhaps he could sense something. Anything. Or even contact Plagueis, somehow make his presence known, as his apprentice would never allow him to survive, no matter how reduced his powers might be....

But Plagueis wasn't here. Not only had Plagueis somehow vanished, Tenebrous could sense no trace of him ever having been here at all.... what was happening? How could this be?

The only trace of organic life Tenebrous could sense were some ancient mummified remains....

Of a Bith.

How long had he been here? How long would it take for every trace of Plagueis to vanish? Those remains were years old-decades, perhaps centuries old.

Tenebrous wondered, with dawning horror, if his retrovirus might have somehow mutated, if its effects on the maxi-chlorians might go somehow deeper than excision of foresight?

What if his eternal life would be.... this?

Or worse: what if his foresight hadn't been eliminated, but had been somehow twisted in upon itself? What if his remains were ancient because this was the thousandth time he had relived his death and the shattering revelation of his life-long self-deception.... what if this was the millionth time he'd relived it?

The billionth?

Then he knew, and at that moment he wished he still had a mouth, because he really, really needed to scream.

Dying, Tenebrous observed with mild surprise, was turning out to be not only pleasant, but wholly wonderful; had he ever suspected how much he'd enjoy the process, he wouldn't have wasted all these decades waiting for his foolish apprentice Plagueis to do him in....

## Between A Rock And A Hard Place

Melnea set out into the hot desert at first twilight. As she walked into the darkening hills, she hoped she could win over the small creatures by approaching them alone and unarmed. Scrambling over a small hill, she paused. Despite the setting suns, the desert was still too hot. But she knew it would soon turn bitter cold. She checked the parka and tools stored in her backpack, swept her long black hair back behind her ears, and resumed her hiking.

Another hour's walk brought her scraped hands and knees, but no sign of the elusive residents. For all she knew, they were watching her from the dark regions of the canyons. Rounding a corner, she suddenly spotted a group of the tiny folk cornered against a rock outcropping. Facing them was what looked to be a huge reptile. It was whimpering in pain as its massive head lolled from side to side. Melnea saw immediately that the lizard's bleeding front paw was caught in a fissure of rock. She also saw that the beast was well within range of the little creatures, who could only huddle in fear.

She moved swiftly, throwing a rock behind the beast. The lizard turned away, toward the distraction, and she moved in closer. Grabbing a hydroshovel from her backpack, she wedged it in the crevice and yanked. There was no change, and the beast was turning back to her. She dodged a front paw plunked down blindly by the lizard as it attempted to twist free its foot.

Melnea grabbed a piton from her pack and, using the hydroshovel as a hammer, chipped away at the sides of the fissure. Her hair fell into her face. She could feel the warm air blowing from the beast's nostrils as she worked. She concentrated on chiseling away at the stone.

Then its head blocked out the final light of the second twilight as its jaws dipped toward her. She gave the hydroshovel one last pound, the rock splintered, and the lizard suddenly heaved itself free. It snorted once or twice, but made no move to attack. Instead, it lay down and licked its injury.

With that, the brown-clad natives grabbed a heavy cable and threw it over the beast's head. They jabbered to each other in that language Melnea and her friends had puzzled over for so long, and finally beckoned for her to follow. With her heart soaring, she walked behind them as they led her to a nearby area. It was a small village hidden among the cliffs and mountains of the area. A corral of sorts was set up, in which two other beasts like this one appeared to be grazing for moisture, pushing their noses deep into the desert gravel.

The creatures put the lizard in the stockade and disappeared into a cave. Melnea followed. Although it was dark out, the utter blackness of the cave required some adjustment. She paused, trying to listen. Surely these creatures weren't capable of seeing in the dark? Suddenly a metal arm grabbed her and a voice exclaimed, "Mistress Melnea! Oh, thank goodness!"

"Twopio? Is that you?"

"Thank heavens you've come! These Jawas ... these creatures! Oh, my. And not an oil bath anywhere to be found!"

Melnea grinned and relaxed. It was, indeed, 2PO. "Twopio, is that their name? Jawas?"

She could almost sense the Droid straightening himself up, in a move as close to a strut as was mechanically possible.

"Yes, Mistress. I have had ample opportunity to be immersed into their culture and have managed to decipher some of their language, complex as it is. They call themselves Jawas. And they, uh, borrowed me mostly out of curiosity, not malice."

Melnea patted 2PO's arm. She knew the high-strung Droid. When the Jawas first captured him, he probably thought he was about to be eaten or broken down for parts. She realized he had had terrific motivation to learn the language, for which she was very thankful. As she sat down, a stove deeper in the cave glowed to life. Melnea brushed the hair away from her face and saw Jawas scurry about preparing a meal. "Twopio, tell me more."

## Jedi Master Lanius Qel-Bertuk Recording

*Greetings, my friends.*

*As you know, it has been two weeks since academy headmaster Nerra Ziveri disappeared. His last known position was on the far side of Almas, at the Sith temple. What you may not know is that for some years, Master Nerra had turned much of his attention to probing the fortress's dark side aura in earnest. His final communication was with me, telling me to take charge of the academy.*

*Yes. Yes, I know what many of you are thinking. You are recalling an earlier disappearance, and you are imagining the worst. But we have several new students in our presence, students who are unfamiliar with the precedent, and must now know the story of Kibh Jeen.*

*One hundred thirty-five years ago, the Council sent the Jedi Qornah and his Padawan, the Jedi consular Kibh Jeen, to Almas. They traveled by shuttle, with Qornah as the pilot. Their mission was to examine and explore the Sith temple, which—though long dormant—continued to radiate evil. There was some urgency to the mission, because many colonists were arriving in the Cularin system at the time. But the same day that Qornah and Kibh Jeen touched down on Almas, Qornah died and Kibh Jeen vanished.*

*Months later, another Jedi team discovered Qornah's remains. There was no sign of Kibh Jeen or the shuttle. Because there were no known eyewitnesses to whatever had transpired on Almas, the Jedi Council sent the most powerful psychometrics to trace the paths and reconstruct the actions of both the dead and missing Jedi. What these psychometrics learned was shocking.*

*After Qornah and Kibh Jeen had landed their shuttle on Almas, they walked toward the half-buried fortress. As Qornah probed the area with the Force, he did not hear the whispers that pressed against his apprentice's mind. Kibh Jeen succumbed to these whispered temptations, cutting his Master down from behind. Then, stepping over Qornah's corpse, Kibh Jeen approached the walls of the fortress and disappeared.*

*Jeen rematerialized shortly before the arrival of the Jedi team who found Qornah's body. Evidently he had accessed the Sith fortress, and gained much knowledge. Taking the shuttle, he set off across space. There, the psychometrics account ends, but Kibh Jeen was just getting started.*

*Searching for minions who would make useful tools, Jeen found pirates in the Cularin asteroid belt who suited his purposes admirably. He dominated their minds and, through them, attracted others to his service. Soon he had built an army, and he unleashed his forces on the floating cities of Genarius, the third planet in the Cularin system. Thousands died. This assault launched the Dark Jedi Conflict.*

*For seven years, Kibh Jeen and his mindless soldiers dominated the Cularin system. Their warships stopped or attacked all incoming transports, then disappeared to their hiding places in the asteroid belt. No one could find them, let alone eliminate them.*

*Finally, a Jedi Knight and her Padawan came to Cularin. After they organized the system's inhabitants and trading companies to build an armada, the Jedi used the Force to locate the pirates and lure them into a trap. The pirate fleet was crushed, and Kibh Jeen did not escape. Before he died, he was heard spouting gibberish about*



there always being no more or less than two Sith.

After this regrettable incident, the Jedi decided to maintain a permanent presence near the fortress to study it and attempt to ward off its evil. Our academy is now over 130 years old, and from what I have gathered the fortress remains, as ever, a malevolent entity that we can only continue to monitor from a distance.

I know some of you may be eager to find out what happened to Master Nerra Ziveri. There is often more satisfaction in knowing than wondering, and it is discomfoting that we are left with so many questions.

Was the power of the dark side strong on this world before the arrival of the Sith Lord who built the fortress? Was the fortress entirely responsible for transforming Kibh Jeen into a Dark Jedi, or was there already a darkness lurking within him? Were Kibh Jeen's dying words about the Sith a threat or a warning? Should we expect the return of Master Nerra Ziveri, or count him among the dead?

Only this I know for certain. Although the answers may be found within that fortress, these are not answers we should pursue without extreme caution.

Let us not consider Master Nerra a casualty, and let us be patient. For though patience can be difficult, it is by the will of the Force that we shall wait.

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50 bby

### They're After Our Credits

*Memoirs of Firmus Kett, Captain, Trade Defense Force*

My great-great-great-grandfather Findal was the one who turned Kett Shipping into a Trade Federation subsidiary. He was glad to do it. And despite all that's happened recently, I'm glad he did too.

My family has been running ore and nova crystals out of Cotellier for centuries — there isn't much out our way in Rseik Sector, but there are credits to be made, if you work hard enough and learn from your mistakes. We run transports up the Sanrafsix Corridor to Kabal, where the ore and crystals get offloaded and sent to factories in the Inner Rim or the Expansion Region. Then back to Cotellier with grain, ag supplies, whatever we can turn around for a few credits more. We aren't barons or anything, but we have our family holdings, investments on Ma'ar Shaddam and Rseik proper, and a retreat on Z'trop we always swear we'll get to more often than we do.

Why do we have all that? Because of the Trade Federation.

By Findal's time the Republic had basically ceased to exist beyond Kabal. Tamarin Sector was a joke — its Senator was a spice lord from Sevarcos who only traveled to Coruscant when his latest wife wanted to see the opera. Its sector fleet's only concern was making sure the spice haulers delivered andris and carsunum to Kabal or Svivren. As long as that happened, they didn't care what happened elsewhere in the sector. There were pirates everywhere — the Sanrafsix was a no-go zone beyond Dravian Station, and even there you went armed and kept your blaster loose in its holster. Our Planetary Security Forces weren't much better; they weren't pirates, but they were outgunned by them. They stuck close to port and hoped nothing would happen.

One year we ran six convoys to Kabal and had four of them taken by the pirates of Tertiary Fajar. We ransomed three of them; the Fajari took the fourth and sold the crew to Karazak slavers. The next year we ran five convoys and only one made it back. For a couple of years Findal ran convoys across the Little Minos Run instead, but then the Hajara gang showed up on Corva Yag and started taking transports there. What could Findal do? You never saw a Judicial hull past Kabal. Out here we had a government that couldn't fight pirates; in Tamarin the government and the pirates were one and the same.

Then came the Bordal Contagion of 214 BBY. I don't know what it was — some kind of plague that left people strangling on fluid in their lungs, awful stuff. I think it was the first time the Republic had thought about Rseik sector in a century or so. They figured out an antidote on Tauber and started sending holds full of it to Kabal. We sent transports to fetch it — everybody did. The Fajari raided the first convoy, stripped the engines and the hyperdrives and set the transports adrift without power — six million doses ruined. The Republic did nothing. Eventually the Rseikharhl set up their own labs to manufacture the stuff themselves, but the delay cost millions of Bordali lives.

That was when Findal, the Rseikharhl, the Ma'ar Shaddam Weaponsmiths Guild and a bunch of other interests got together and decided to approach the Trade Federation. They arranged a secret meeting with a Federation agent on Syned — Findal's diary says he was a Balmorran half the size of a shipping container. The Balmorran pored over all the datacards they'd brought him — intel on pirate bands and craft, financial records, planetary profiles, the works. Took it all in fast as an accounting droid. He said yes the next day — Kett Shipping, Rseikharhl Hullspace, Cotellieri Transports Limited, we all became Trade Federation members.



The first thing the Federation did was bring in a flotilla of gunboats and system patrol craft via Svivren, backed up with a pair of *Munifexes* and a *Captor*. First trip to Kabal, the convoy hit an ice-asteroid screen and reverted to realspace at Tertiary Fajar. Here came the pirates, only this time they were looking down the barrels of a couple of dozen TDF guns. An hour later the Fajari ships were space junk and their main asteroid base was a crater. Findal said it was the happiest day of his life. A week later the Hajaras got theirs, too. Within a decade the Trade Federation had upgraded spaceport facilities at Kirdo and Laria, established a depot for goods at Tyne Albamon, blazed a faster route to Svivren, and installed a TDF marine post at Dravian Station. By then we were running more than 20 convoys a year, and not losing a single one.

I know things are different now. The Trade Federation runs Tamarin and Rseik sectors, and there are Neimoidian fingers in the ore trade and the crystals business. And spice, of course. Serving in the TDF, I've been ordered to do things that I wonder if I could explain while looking old Findal in the eye. But you have to understand what these sectors were like before the Trade Federation arrived. And if it were made to leave? Then there'd be no law at all.

### **Master Yoda recording**

*Often difficult to see, the future is, like searching for raindrops beneath the surface of the water. But raindrops do fall, and discerned in depths, they can be. Fleeting can be visions of the future, momentary glimpses of both the familiar and the strange. More dangerous are clear visions, as easy it is to confuse clarity with truth. Truth can be murky, and crucial is perspective to any vision.*

*See you do from the right angle at the wrong thing, or from the wrong angle at the right thing? No perspective is fixed.*

*Frequently am I asked if inevitable is the future. Do visions reveal what may be or what will be? Know you will when a vision is what will be. Feel it by the Force you will. Know you will whether to chase raindrops before they fall or remain where you are. Stay where you are, and move you will anyway. Always in motion is the future.*

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## Master Yareal Poof recording

Young Jedi, I know many of you are eager to test your affect mind abilities, and that some have already attempted this power amongst yourselves. While it can be most useful in conflict resolution, affect mind must be used with restraint, almost always as a last resort, after exhausting less dangerous avenues that lead to peace. Yes, less dangerous, say I, for the power can easily cause permanent damage to a relatively innocent subject.

For example, imagine you are on a mission that requires you to discreetly infiltrate a secured building. Despite your efforts at stealth, you are sighted by an armed guard. Ah, an opportunity for affect mind! But with so many opportunities to choose from, what is a Jedi to do?

Before you answer, consider this: While the guard may prove to be an obstacle on your mission, he is also a living being. He may not be menacing by nature, merely an employee or servant. He may have a family, others who care about him. Had you met him under different circumstances, you might have discovered him to be a friend and ally.

What to do, then? Make the guard see you as a small, unthreatening creature? Make him go to sleep, or forget he saw you at all? Hypnotically suggest that you have leapt away from where you are standing, and encourage the guard to chase the apparition you have created? Project a frightening image that will cause him to flee?

All these things could very well work, young Jedi, but have you considered the consequences? What if the guard enjoys shooting at small, unthreatening creatures? What if his species is physically incapable of sleep? What if he forgets he saw you, but the fact that he even unwittingly allowed you to pass will cost him his job or

his life? What physical trauma will he suffer if he chases your apparition into a wall of solid rock? What if you strike such fear in him that he dies on the spot, or forgets the nature of gravity as he tries to escape over the edge of the nearest cliff?

I need not lecture that you are responsible for your decisions and actions. However, I will remind you that any course will leave a wake, and that even the smallest ripple can cause death. I also will remind you that you have yet to resolve that problem with the guard.

Makes you wish you had been more stealthy, yes?

I have presented only a few variables for you to consider about the situation with the guard, but this is enough for you to realize that it would be irresponsible of me to encourage any specific utilization of affect mind.

I will make a few suggestions, however.

As a Jedi, you should be able to sense immediately whether the guard is prone to violence or susceptible to fear. This knowledge can be used to your advantage, and may direct your use of affect mind. Also, you must determine whether it is best to divert or subdue your target. Such decisions must often be made instantly, without hesitation.

What would I have done in such a situation, you ask? I really can't say. A Jedi is not proud or boastful, and I trust you will understand I am sincere when I say that it is hard for me to imagine that the guard might have spied me in the first place, had I not wished to be seen.

But if a guard had seen me, I might make him believe I was nothing but a gust of wind, or the shadow of a soaring indigenous avian. A Jedi can do such things, for it is the will of the Force.

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## Dooku recording

*Hello, younglings. Asli Krimsan has asked me to tell you about using the Force to move objects. Rather than offer specific instruction, I offer you my recollection of the day I learned that this skill was something more than a Jedi's own personal tractor beam.*

*Unlike many Jedi, my origins were always something of a public record. My homeworld was Serenno, my family wealthy and of noble rank, and they were proud that I had been conscripted into the Jedi Order. In my youth, I believed that my fellow Jedi knew of my background and so looked upon me differently. Not with sympathy, envy, admiration, or disdain, but merely differently, as if my being a Jedi was not as remarkable as was my lineage. I stress that this was my perception, and mine alone. I was never treated unfairly.*

*And yet, as a child at the Jedi Temple, there were times when I wanted to separate myself from my biological relatives. I thought that if I knew less of my origins, I would not feel as I did, as though I had a greater burden to prove myself. I did my best and pushed myself to be better, as I thought this might alleviate the weight that I felt upon my shoulders.*

*My self-consciousness did not go unnoticed by Master Yoda. I was just over seven years old on the day that I crossed paths with him at a garden in the Temple, a research laboratory for the Jedi Agricultural Corps. I found him on a stone path, standing beside a potted long-stemmed plant that had broad, translucent yellow leaves. He gazed up at the delicate leaves, and told me the plant was alien, very rare, the only one of its kind on Coruscant. He said some service droids had left the plant on the path, and he wondered if I might move it onto a nearby patch of grass. I bent to pick up the ceramic pot, but before my fingers touched it, Master Yoda encouraged me to use the Force.*

*Every Jedi learner is trained to move objects, and I had already proved some capability with this skill. I stepped back to examine the rounded shape of the pot and sensed the air around it, then allowed my mind to lock onto the pot. I attempted to visualize it rising from the path, but the pot merely shifted, scraping the surface of the stone that it continued to rest upon.*

*Collecting myself, I focused on the pot's base, confirmed that it was not vacuum-locked to the path, then pushed upward. The pot wobbled, causing the plant's leaves to tremble. Using the Force, I touched the leaves and calmed them, and it was then that I felt the plant's own life energy, something a tractor beam could never do. It had been my error to think of the plant as an inanimate object, rather than something linked to the Force itself.*

*I extended my hold and visualized the pot within a column that extended from the garden floor to the ceiling. Finding myself short of breath, I inhaled, then slowly, slowly, I lifted the pot until it hovered a full meter above the path.*

*I guided the plant through the air and lowered it upon the grass. Although I'd meant for a soft landing, I was surprised when the pot sank a few millimeters into the ground, the base tearing the blades of grass.*

*Master Yoda then said, "Incredibly dense alien soil, that plant can only survive in. Very heavy, the pot is. Neglected to tell you of this, I did. No matter. The path it blocks no longer." Then he looked me in the eye and said, "Why our paths cross today, I wonder?"*

*With some reluctance, I confided my belief that other Jedi regarded me as different because of my heritage. Master Yoda responded with great laughter. When he recovered, he said, "Aware of your family, few Jedi are. For themselves, your skills and behavior speak. Think others look at you differently, do you? Because of your posture, they might. Stand straighter than any other youngling, you do!"*

*The lesson that I learned from Master Yoda was that burdens are only as heavy as one imagines, and that—with the Force—any weight can be lifted.*

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## Master Oppo Rancisis recording

*The Force can be used in many ways to subdue an opponent, but the principal quality of Malacia is that the Jedi achieves it not by expending energy but by transforming the energy of the target. Critics always note that Malacia is limited to organic opponents, but there are many situations where it is preferable to other means.*

*Imagine a sentry guarding a post that you must bypass. The sentry may be standing still, but his mind is alert and his systems are functioning. Everything is in motion. Blood flows, muscles tense, food is digested, and atmospheric gases are inhaled and exhaled. All that motion is enough to make him dizzy and queasy, and by focusing on the flow of blood, you can make that happen. The sentry will be so overwhelmed that he is completely disabled, yet will suffer no permanent side effects.*

*Now imagine a gang of murderous warriors running toward an intended victim when they are suddenly sickened by their own movements. Robbed of their sense of balance and unable to proceed, the warriors collapse, clutching at the ground as if they might fall from it. There are some Jedi Masters who have contended that such brutes may benefit from Malacia, as it serves to remind them that they are—like their prey—mere mortals.*

*Malacia requires a direct line of sight between the Jedi and the targets, regardless of distance. However, if the targets begin to retch, you may want to briefly avert your gaze, as this is almost always unpleasant to watch.*

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## Master Yaddle recording

*Learned of Morichro from a single source, I did not. Barely hinted at it, three holocrons did. Partially described over many ancient scrolls and tomes, it was. Used by Jedi long ago, Morichro was. Used, forbidden, and forgotten.*

*A Force technique, it is. The body functions of targets, it rapidly slows. Most effective for subduing opponents, this is.*

*Yet dangerous, too. Constantly monitored, a target must be. Fail to reverse the process, should the Jedi, and indefinite, the unconsciousness can be. Die of dehydration*

*or starvation, can an untended target. Realized this, the ancient Jedi did.*

*Much research into history, I have done. Known to use this technique, dark side Force-users are not. Not malevolent is Morichro. To master Morichro, less malevolent uses of the Force must a student master first.*

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## Master Plo Koon recording

*At the request of the Jedi Council, I submit this report of my actions on the mission to Metellos, specifically my use of Force lightning.*

*I'd been tracking Dreed Pommel for five days across space before I found him on Metellos. Pommel had taken refuge in an executive suite within the floating city of Ektra. Despite my efforts at stealth, Pommel was somehow alerted to my approach, for when I entered the suite he was already clutching a female human child and holding a blaster to her head.*

*The suite was spacious, and I was separated from Pommel by a distance of fifteen meters. Keeping his eyes on me, Pommel began pulling the crying girl—I estimated her to be five years old—out through a wide doorway, beyond which I could see a small ship that rested on the suite's private landing pad. Obviously, his intent was to escape, and he considered the child his insurance. I had no reason to doubt that he would ultimately kill her, even if I allowed them to board the escape vessel, for I could see what he'd done to the girl's parents and two siblings, whose bodies lay upon the floor of the inner suite.*

*In hindsight, there were many possible tactics I might have employed to apprehend Pommel and rescue the child, but I did not consider any options or calculate angles of attack as I watched him drag her toward the ship. I believe I acted entirely instinctively when I extended my right arm toward Pommel and released a barrage of lightning.*

*I know that the Jedi Council was hesitant to send me on any assignment so soon after the death of Master Tyvokka, but I did not let loose with Force lightning the way undisciplined beings might release stress. Like other Jedi, I learned of Force lightning at the Jedi Temple, and I am well aware that*

*it is regarded as a dark side power. I never had any special interest in Force lightning, or felt compelled to experiment with it, but I knew it was—at least in me—an innate ability. I did not feel anger as I directed the lightning at Pommel's head, nor did I fear for the girl's safety. I was calm and in control of my faculties. I merely acted to end the situation before any more innocents died.*

*Upon being struck by the first bolt, Pommel reacted as anticipated as the shock seized his system. His arms flew out and away from his body, releasing both the blaster and the child, who fell to the landing pad. A second bolt ensured that Pommel would remain unconscious until the local authorities arrived. I was never tempted to deal a killing blow.*

*Upon my return from Metellos, my use of Force lightning was included in my report to the Council. I maintained that I did not embrace the dark side when I used this ability, and that I acted by the will of the Force.*

*I appreciate the Council's concern with my report. I have not forgotten that it was Master Tyvokka's last wish that I join the Council. I also acknowledge the Council's observation that the Force runs strong in my family. My uncle was a Jedi Knight, as is my niece Sha Koon. While Kel Dors like ourselves have a reputation for seeing moral issues in black and white, I urge the Council to disregard my family in this situation, for I alone am responsible for my actions.*

*The Council asked me to contemplate whether I would hesitate to use Force lightning again, and whether I was wrong to employ it on Metellos. After much meditation, I believe it would be wrong of me to ignore this power that I might develop into a useful technique for combat. As for whether I was wrong to use it, I believe the only person who can rightfully answer that question is a five-year-old girl. Her name is Claria Labreezle, and she has been placed with relatives at Stratablock 7 on Metellos.*

*May the Force be with us all.*

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**Master Saesee Tiin recording**

*When I was a Padawan, many of my fellow students believed that my inherited telepathic abilities gave me an unfair advantage in my education. It is true that I never had difficulty in communicating my thoughts or comprehending the thoughts of others, but I do not believe that this made my education any easier. For unlike my peers, I was a natural receiver and transmitter of thoughts, a condition that I—not then able to organize incoming thoughts or consistently contain my own deliberations—often considered a hindrance and, at times, an embarrassment. I will not share details, but allow you to imagine. Had I been raised on Iktotch, where societies are designed to accommodate telepaths, my circumstances still would have been awkward, for my Force sensitivity would have set me apart.*

*I did my best to seal off my mind from others. I found that I could home in on the minds of specific beings if I maintained eye contact. I also learned to incorporate my abilities during a fight.*

*In combat, telepaths do have a distinct edge. Even if one fights by instinct and reflex, most cannot stop themselves from emitting monosyllabic thoughts that project their next movement. During my training bouts at the Jedi Temple, my opponents unwittingly revealed their every move, allowing me that crucial fraction of a moment that enabled me to be the one who would remain standing. Understandably, my fellow Jedi students began to keep their distance.*

*I came to the attention of the Jedi Master Omo Bouri, a Wol Cabbashite who, for reasons I could not fathom, selected me as his Padawan. I had never encountered a Wol Cabbashite before. Master Omo's cognitive brain, as opposed to the one that controlled his digestive tasks, was so highly evolved and alien from mine that his musings were often indecipherable. To communicate, he used phonemic pulses of energy with syntactic contours in a magnetic field that he exuded and controlled with his tongue. At first, I couldn't understand his thoughts or a single word he said. It was a most refreshing experience.*

*I'd thought I knew more than I needed to know about telepathy, but Master Omo showed me that I was wrong. He showed me how to use the Force to isolate my own brain waves, intercept stray thoughts, and screen dozens of minds at once. How to whisper across space, yell without noise, keep secrets, and sift through layers of lies and buried memories to uncover the truth. How to seek out information from the stars themselves, allowing one to astrogate a starship through lightspeed without a nav computer.*

*What's more, he taught me the meaning of conviction and dedication to the Jedi Order.*

*What path might my life have taken had not Omo Bouri chosen me as his Padawan? I do not care to speculate, for I am certain any other path would have been far less engaging. And I would have been less of a Jedi.*



### **Count Dooku Protest**

*With all due respect, I urge the Council to consider our responsibility to the Jedi as well as to the Republic. To send our brethren to any world at a moment's notice may bring approval from the Senate, but does it honor those who fell at Galidraan? I am not a fatalist, nor am I suggesting that we embrace the bureaucracy of the Senate as a means to determine whom we can and cannot save, but I am concerned that we allow ourselves to serve without question. Yes, the Bando Gora are criminals, but is it not criminal to squander the lives of Jedi on missions that are so obviously doomed from the start?*

### **Darth Maul: Restraint**

Before Maul was a Sith—before he was Darth Maul—he was a young man, made to hide his true nature as he learned the ways of combat.

In the shadows, though, Darth Sidious taught him about the cruelty and power of the dark side of the Force.

It was the only world he knew, and he yearned for the chance to embrace what he knew to be his destiny.

But then his past came to reclaim him, and his whole world changed...

Above the frozen floor of the Vale of Pale Tears, young Maul zigzagged for cover, the scuffed toes of his combat boots digging into fragile ground, black-gloved hands seeking purchase where the grade steepened. Once more the gritty soil shifted under his feet and he fell hard on his right knee. Low-energy blaster bolts

fired from below struck the slope to all sides of him, flinging hot shingle into his unprotected face. A bolt caught him in the calf as he scrambled upward, and he cursed his carelessness. As it was, his utility suit was holed from previous strikes, and his body was rashed with coin-sized welts and burns. If the goal of the pursuit had been elimination rather than capture, he would already be lying dead on the frigid bank of the valley's meandering river.

A tall pinnacle of eroded stone provided momentary shelter. Maul narrowed himself behind it as blaster bolts added to the abuses nature had wrought. Breathless in the thin air and favoring his right knee, he lowered himself to peer from behind the base of the pillar. Ordinary eyes wouldn't have been able to trace the movements of his would-be captors, but eyes enhanced by the Force allowed him to outsmart the camouflage provided by their suits. In the lead hurried the human, Meltch Krakko, who would have shot Maul years ago if not for Trezza's intervention. Flanking him loped two of the short-snouted Rodians Meltch had trained, Hubnutz and Fretch, skilled in both tracking and sharp-shooting.

Even holding his genuine powers back, he had enjoyed a solid lead until a surprise move by Meltch had forced Maul to divert from his original plan. Splashing through the iced river, clambering into the rugged terrain of the valley's north wall ... Beings from hot, humid worlds shouldn't have been able to keep up with him. But along with the mimetic suits, the Rodians were sporting respirator masks. As for Meltch, he was built for any climate, any terrain, and decades of combat on diverse worlds had transformed him into a kind of super-soldier. Not extraordinary in the way Maul was, but powerful in another way.

A profane way, as he had been taught to think of it.

Pressing his back to the pocked spire, he scanned his immediate surroundings, then lifted his gaze to the summit of the slope, limned against the cloudless blue-green sky. This part of Orsis was a landscape more suited to the planet's outermost moon, and the reason the valley and its sinuous river were known as Pale Tears. Descending raggedly from the face of a volcano ten kilometers high, the river spilled onto a deeply fissured tableland, and over the eons had fashioned from the valley wall a veritable forest of mesas and towering pinnacles, cleaved by crevasses and dotted with spiny cacti whose translucent juice was said to cause hallucinations in some species.



A blaster bolt whizzed past the vestigial horns that crowned Maul's hairless black and red skull, and he shot to his feet. A quick follow-up glance revealed that his pursuers were attempting to surround him, covering for one another as they raced between protective outcroppings, trusting in the masking properties of their high-tech outfits. Maul raised his blaster and drew a bead on the nearest Rodian, forefinger trembling on the trigger, as if urging him to shoot. And he would have, if not for the blowback that would follow from seeing what he shouldn't have been able to see. Frustrated, he bared his teeth to the cold dry wind sweeping down from the glacier and muttered another curse. Only when he was compelled to remain in the profane world did his feet slip out from under him and his lungs strain to deliver sufficient oxygen to his muscles. Only in the profane world was he forced to play the inferior quarry to safeguard his strength in the Force.

Better to wait, he told himself. Better to lead the three of them to higher ground, where the air was even thinner and the mimetic suits would be hard-pressed to provide concealment. There he would turn the tables in what might at least appear to be an ordinary way.

In his thoughts, his Master spoke to him: Imagine your trail, and the Force will open it.

Backing out of the pinnacle's meager shadow, he deliberately showed himself for an instant before commencing another upward slalom. Blaster bolts dogged his churning footsteps, then caught him in the same calf—and in the right shoulder. This time he engulfed the pain, and used it to fuel his mounting anger. But Meltch had to be wondering why his prey wasn't slowing down or accepting defeat. So Maul stumbled before resuming his pace. A climb of some four hundred meters brought him just short of the valley rim, where water and wind had created a maze of spires and pinnacles.

How simple it would be to soar through them, leaving scarcely an imprint of my boots. But not here, not now; not in the profane world.

Well-aimed bolts caromed and ricocheted from the spires, filling the air with particulate debris. Maul turned once to return fire, missing wildly, as he should. The shooting stopped as he threaded his way deeper into the stony labyrinth, edging through tight passages, crawling through others, leaping narrow chasms. With the rim in sight, he began to formulate a plan for catching his pursuers unaware. Meltch would be harder to fool than the Rodians. By now the

Mandalorian knew all of Maul's tricks, and indeed was responsible for his learning some of them. But Maul had learned some of Meltch's tricks that the human hadn't meant to teach, and was counting on the fact that the Mandalorian would send the Rodians to outflank him, while he himself continued to hound Maul from behind.

Emerging from the spires, he crouched for a moment in the whistling silence. At the head of the valley loomed a snow-capped conical mountain, lording over all it surveyed, a sole cloud wafting from its summit like a lavender banner. Cautiously, Maul ascended to the top of the slope, only to spy Meltch not 50 meters in front of him, standing with his back to a jagged rend in the broken terrain. How Meltch had gotten past him, Maul couldn't guess. Some Death Watch technique, he supposed. But Maul wasn't supposed to be able to see him, so he steeled himself and advanced into the pain. Meltch's first bolt struck him in the right shoulder, spinning him partway around, but Maul completed the turn of his own volition and began a mad dash for the edge of the snaking crevasse. With near-misses from the Mandalorian's blaster prodding him forward, he realized suddenly that his eyes had deceived him. More gaping than it had appeared from his earlier vantage, the chasm should have proved an impossible leap for a fifteen-year-old Zabrak—even for one who had spent almost a decade in combat training. Meltch would expect him to stop short of the edge and surrender, but instead he quickened his pace and jumped, arms and legs pumping as if to grant him greater momentum.

He allowed himself to slam into the far wall, using the Force to cushion the impact and hooking his hands over an outcropping a few meters below the rim. Having found a narrower gap, Meltch and the Rodians weren't long in reaching him, gathering in their supposed invisibility on the rim to gaze down at him. Maul had himself convinced that his rash move—his leap of faith—had earned him the respect of his fellow warriors. But only until they began to taunt him by kicking debris from the rim in the hope that Maul would lose his grip and plunge to an accidental death.

Scarcely the first under the Mando's watch.

Anger consumed Maul. How much longer would he be required to conceal his real abilities, to be made to seem mediocre—like some still struggling neophyte—when he was so much more?

Calling on the Force again, he launched himself from the chasm, somersaulting and half-twisting in mid-air, so that when his boots struck the resilient ground he was facing the backs of his hunters with his blaster in hand. By the time the three of them whirled—Meltch's lined face contorted in bafflement—Maul was already triggering bolts, as if firing at beings he couldn't see but knew to be in front of him.

Still trusting in the suits, they scattered, shooting blindly on the run. Though not a bolt found Maul, the Force guided him to their targets, and each pained outcry elated him. The blaster was almost depleted when Meltch deactivated his suit and shouted for Maul to stand down. But Maul ignored him. Swept up in the grip of sadistic delight, he kept firing, the dark side writhing through him like an aggrieved serpent.

And one day he would be able to unleash bolts of electricity from his fingertips!

Above him, cutting through the reports of the overheated blaster and the Mando's calls for capitulation, an amplified voice Maul had known since childhood ordered him to cease fire.

Around the smoothed top of a low, bone-dry hill, an airspeeder came into view, settling into levitation mode as it put down at the edge of the chasm, a short but powerfully built Falleen seated at the controls. Aiming a glance at Meltch and the now-visible Rodians, the reptilian biped leapt from the speeder and approached Maul, snatching the blaster from his grip and tossing it aside.

"What were you thinking?" Trezza said under his breath.

Meltch had holstered his weapon and was gazing into the dark chasm, at the spot where Maul had seemingly been hanging on for dear life. When he swung around his eyes were narrowed in suspicion.

"How did you—?"

"I pushed off from a ledge," Maul said.

Meltch took a second look and scowled. Turning back to Maul, he said, "How did you manage to target us?"

“The suits were glitched. They couldn’t decide how to blend you into the background.”

Meltch glanced to the Rodians, who shook their heads. Furious, then, he stormed past Trezza. Maul sensed the punch coming long before the Mando put his weight behind it. Standing still, he turned his head in the direction of the gauntleted blow and managed to remain on his feet. Spitting blood to the ground, he glared at the Mando.

Meltch snorted and offered up his square chin. “Go ahead, Maul, since you seem bent on making this personal.”

“You’ve made it personal for two years.”

“To push you to your limits,” Meltch said. “To make you a warrior.” Meltch held Maul’s yellow-eyed gaze. “Personal or professional. You can’t have it both ways.”

A head shorter than both Maul or Meltch, Trezza stepped between them. It was never a good sign when a Falleen took on color, and Trezza’s face was shifting through the spectrum.

“Enough,” he said. “No points for either side.”

Meltch scoffed. “He’ll never make the grade, Trezza. Not until he decides to be honest with us. Until then, we’re wasting our time.”

In the training camp’s headquarters astride the turbulent sea, Trezza inspected the burns that covered Maul’s torso, which like his head and face was marked with esoteric black and red sigils.

“These require treatment.”

Trezza summoned a medical droid forward, but Maul shoved it away with his feet.

“Not from bacta,” he snarled. “I’ll heal myself.”

“And revel in the pain.”

“There is no pain.”

“So you’ve said.”

Maul looked at him. “You can’t understand.”

“Admittedly,” Trezza said. “But that doesn’t change the fact that you appear to have forgotten more than you’ve learned.”

Maul tugged the upper portion of the utility suit over his shoulders. “Perhaps I’ll know a thing or two when I’ve lived as long as you have.”

Trezza shrugged. “Continue dishonoring your oath, and you’ll be fortunate to see sixteen years.”

“That’s my concern.”

“Ultimately, it is.”

The Falleen had been silent during the return trip from the high valley, releasing pheromones meant to pacify Maul, even though he was largely immune to their effects. Nearing two hundred standard years, Trezza had spent half his life training mercenaries and paramilitaries for planetary governments throughout the Republic—not to mention supplying professional combatants for the Petranaki Arena on Geonosis and the Cauldron on Rattatak, and forging assassins and intelligence agents for royal houses and criminal cartels alike. An even more skilled fighter than Meltch, he was also the closest Maul had to a protector—in the ordinary world.

“Meltch is intent on goading you into revealing your true nature. Members of the Death Watch were brutally honest with one another and loyal to a fault.”

“Then why did the group splinter?”

“They underestimated a rival they thought they had eliminated. With their leader dead, the rest scattered and Meltch wound up here, because, we, too, value loyalty and tradition. If not an ideal trainer, he’s a gifted strategist. And he was correct about your making this personal. Especially now that your powers are increasing.”

Trezza met Maul's silence with a faint grin. "The vault from the chasm was a brilliant move. But you demeaned it by giving in to your emotions."

"I could have done far worse than tag Meltch and the Rodians with bolts," Maul said.

Trezza's smile collapsed. "You and I know that, but that's how it should remain." He paused briefly. "It's not my place to question the purpose of keeping secret the full extent of your powers."

Maul glowered. "Pretense."

"You led me to believe that you were willing to accept it as part of your training."

"Once," Maul said.

Trezza placed his hands on Maul's shoulders. "I wish you'd come to me under different circumstances, Maul, but we both need to honor the arrangement as it stands. Meltch has long suspected that you have the Force, and now you've given him further reason to distrust you. Perhaps he's envious, or perhaps he's one of those who doesn't view the Force with favor. For my part, I'd sooner see you succeed here without employing the Force. As would your benefactor." He fell silent, then said, almost as an afterthought: "He's here, you know."

Maul looked startled.

Trezza nodded. "He came to observe the exercise. He's expecting you."

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In the cavernous main hall of the ancient manse his Master maintained at Blackguard Gorge on Orsis, Maul kneeled, waiting for Sidious to speak. During the lengthy speeder bike trip, he had tried to purge himself of anger and misgiving. He had hoped, in fact, for some being or creature to wander out in front of his racing machine on the aimless tracts that cut through the arid foothills. But none had, and so he had arrived at the stone castle the Muuns had raised with his emotions in the same raw state. His periodic absences from Trezza's combat school had been going on since the start of his training, but he wasn't the only trainee who came and went, and so they had ceased to be a topic of speculation.

"You're not entirely to blame for what happened," Sidious said at last, coming to a halt in front of him. "The dark side has taken a serious interest in you, and is gauging if you might be a proper vessel for its power. Seeking expression and loathing restraint, the dark side tests us continually, competing with our will and our self-imposed priority for secrecy."

A human of middle age and average height, Sidious wore a long, dark-blue cowl that often left his face in deep shadow.

"Yes, Master," Maul said. "I was overcome."

Sidious' eyes blazed from the darkness of the robe's hood. "Overcome? You dare aggrandize your mistake with a lie?"

Maul lowered his gaze to the stone cold floor.

"I said that you weren't entirely to blame. The willingness of the dark side to cooperate in your pitiful and prideful demonstration doesn't exonerate you from debasing the vow you made to me and from jeopardizing my plans for you." Sidious towered over him. "Did you actually imagine that you could come here and dodge responsibility for your blunder? That you could portray yourself as the guileless victim in all this?"

Maul wanted to ask for forgiveness but his steadfast anger wouldn't permit it. In any case, what was the point, since he had received beatings for being right as often as he had for being wrong. Welling up from some unreachable source, rage lifted his head and set his tongue flapping.

But barely a word passed his lips when he felt his throat pinched closed by a negligent gesture of Sidious' right hand.

"Don't interrupt," Sidious warned.

He paced away from Maul, eventually allowing him to breathe, then turned to him.

"In using the Force to extricate yourself from the trap your opponents fashioned, you have called unwanted attention to yourself. I'm aware that the Jedi have been continuing to harass Trezza for creating assassins and proxy armies, so

consider what might have happened had a Jedi been present during the exercise. A Jedi would not only have grasped that you are strong in the Force, but that you have received training in the dark arts, endangering my position. And by the way, your little ploy at the chasm would have elicited little more than laughter from a Jedi Master, in much the way a clown provokes laughter from an audience.”

Once more he stood before Maul. “Now—what did you wish to ask me earlier?”

Maul began tentatively, as if testing his ability to speak.

“How long must I go on being one thing here and another there? Trained in the Force here, and trained to do without it there? What are your plans for me, Master? What am I to you?”

Sidious sniffed. “You are my student, Maul, and one day you may become my apprentice.”

“Your apprentice,” Maul said, not sure what to make of the designation.

“Perhaps. But if that is meant to be, it will come at the end of many trials that will make these present ones seem insignificant. Removed from the shelter of Orsis, you will begin to understand that the Republic is built on deceit, and that it only survives because the Jedi Order wishes it to survive. Beings of all nature will attempt to fill your head with lies in an effort to sweep you into that deceit, and you will need to be resolute in your allegiance to the dark side of the Force.”

“I understand, Master.”

“No,” Sidious said. “You only think you do.”

From the folds of his robe he produced two lightsabers, tossing one of them to Maul before igniting the blade of his own. Maul guessed that the burns he was about to sustain would make the ones he had received from Meltch’s blaster seem like taps of affection.

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Its circuitous innards exposed, the combat vibroblade rested on a low table, alongside a small tool kit. Electrodriver in hand, Maul was working feverishly on the knife’s ultrasonic vibration generator, intent on overriding the built-in



arrestor to supply the blade with greater slashing power. If he wasn't permitted to use the Force, then he would use everything short of it to satisfy the rage inside him; to gut every living thing he encountered during the coming Gora solo. Bathe in the blood he would shed, feast on warm flesh... Merely imagining it set his fingers trembling, and abruptly the tool slipped from its tenuous hold in the socket and stabbed deeply into the palm of his opposite hand, opening a small wound and bursting the dam of his pent-up emotion. Maul's clenched right hand slammed down on the table, shattering its surface, and the vibroblade took flight, nearly impaling itself in his head. Straightening, he bared his filed teeth and tensed his body, close to loosing a scream that would have brought the barracks down around him.

Instead, he inhaled deeply, and lowered himself into a chair, hoping to get control of himself.

For the past year, each time he had returned from a training session with Sidious his anger had known no bounds, even on those rare occasions when his body didn't bear burns from his Master's lightsaber. Sidious had advised him to expect as much, counseling that as Maul's body matured, the dark side would begin to recognize him as a potential ally and begin to lay claim to his thoughts and emotions. It would be a trying time for him, his Master had remarked, a rite of passage, though still not the trials Sidious promised would ultimately break him or earn him an apprenticeship—a partnership in whatever it was Sidious was doing.

Though he had known Sidious for his entire life, he knew little about him. While Maul wasn't a slave, he certainly belonged to Sidious in some way. It was Sidious who had delivered him into Trezza's care eight years earlier. Prior to that, Maul had memories of being reared and tutored by Sidious and his droids on Mustafar, and of journeys by starship to a world called Tosste, where he had been trained in the dark arts. But he had no notion as to who Sidious was in the greater galaxy, or on which world he resided. For all Maul knew, he was a warlord, a sorcerer, a monarch, or even a banished Jedi Master. Whatever the case, for a being with scarcely a past or an identity, Maul found the prospect of eventually being Sidious's apprentice greatly appealing, and though shaken, hurt, and confused by what had recently transpired, he remained determined to prove his worth to his Master.

It occurred to him to wonder if Sidious and Trezza had conspired so that Maul's rite of passage in his Force training should coincide with the academy's similar

rite, during which he was to be left on his own in the Gora, to survive for an Orsis week without food or equipment, save for the vibroblade, in a realm of bloodthirsty beasts.

He was picking up the pieces of his short-lived fit—collecting the knife and the far-flung tools—when two of his fellow trainees entered the barracks.

The taller and older of the pair, Kilindi Matako, scanned the room, taking in the dismantled vibroblade, the table's crazed top, and the fresh blood dripping from Maul's punctured left hand. A Nautolan, her headdress of striped tentacles quivered.

"Everything all right?"

"Accident."

She showed him a dubious look. "Since when."

Kilindi had come to school as a former slave, and had since become Trezza's ward and a capable warrior. From the first day he met her, Maul had nursed a mostly secret attraction for Kilindi. At times he thought she shared his feelings, but emotions were a terrain more perilous than any on Orsis.

The other female was a dark-haired human named Daleen. Rumored to be the princess of a royal house, she was absent from the academy even more often than Maul. Her fighting skills were limited, but Trezza was convinced that Daleen could become an effective stealth agent. The two of them helped Maul gather the last of the tools, then stood close enough for him to inhale their dizzying aromas. For a moment his rage gave way to a feeling of mystifying intoxication.

"Meltch came looking for you," Kilindi said.

Maul gave the doorway a worried glance. "Where is he now?"

"Up top, I think," Daleen said.

Up top was OOS—Orsis Orbital Station. It wasn't unusual for Meltch to be there or off-world, scouting for talent, advising some paramilitary group, or executing a contract. Maul wondered if the Mandalorian and Sidious had ever crossed paths on OOS during their frequent comings and goings.

“Want any tips on what to watch out for in the Gora?” Kilindi said as Maul set to work on reassembling the vibroblade.

He shook his head. “I’ll make do.” I’ve killed dinkos with my bare hands, he wanted to add.

She laughed in a knowing way. “That’s what I said, and look where it got me.”

She didn’t need to display the scars that crisscrossed her muscular arms and shoulders for Maul to get the point.

“Just don’t get lost out there,” Daleen said in a seductive voice. She caressed the back of his head, careful to avoid touching any of his short horns. “We’re cooking up a surprise for your return.”

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Across a sea of stars, the tall, wan Witch had listened attentively to the off-worlder’s tale, subjected herself to images produced by the technology he brought, and now ordered two members of her coven to bring before her the Nightsister named Kycina.

The planet was known as Dathomir, and Mother Talzin’s clan held sway over that remote part of it, enacting rituals to honor the Winged Goddess and the Fanged God, learning the language of great beasts, like the rancor, and conjuring spirit ichor as a means of keeping the natural forces in balance. Few outsiders had seen demonstrations of the coven’s magicks, and most of those who had were dead.

Tainted descendants of an ostracized Jedi, the Nightsisters were nimble humans, though use of dark side powers had altered them physically as well as emotionally. Talzin’s silver eyes were rimmed with permanent bruises that extended upward from their outside corners onto a broad, hairless forehead, framing a shield-like medallion that dangled from a sharply peaked red hood. Her mouth, too, was bracketed by discolorations, as well as deep crevasses that ran from her nostrils to her boxy chin. The straight and swirling adornments that projected from her robes gave her the appearance of a winged insect, a red star, or a deadly flower.

Crowning a platform supported on the upraised arms of stylized human figures, her stone lair featured a facade shaped like an elongated face, whose howling mouth was the edifice's principal entryway.

It was through that yawning hole that Talzin emerged with the offworlder and two red-clad Nightsisters, the latter armed with short swords. The appearance of the four came on learning that Kycina had been located and brought to the Font—a shallow rectangular basin that served as both an altar and a repository for conjured ichor, and around which the members of the coven would gather to perform rituals. The humid air was redolent with the smell of ripening fruits that hung pendulously from the arching, leafless limbs of nearby plants.

Positioned between two Nightsisters on the far side of the Font, Kycina watched Talzin and the others approach. Petite and youthful looking despite her age, she was unarmed, and had the hood of her garment lowered, revealing close-cropped, light-colored hair.

"A Dathomiri Zabrak has been discovered to reside on a distant world known as Orsis," Talzin said without preamble.

For the sake of the offworlder, she spoke in Basic, but her heavy accent undermined her intention. She asked that he show Kycina the holographic images he had shown her earlier, her disdain for the offworlder's device obvious.

"This is the one," Talzin said, gesturing to the device's display screen. "His markings indicate that he was consecrated a Nightbrother before he left our world." Subservient to the Nightsisters and kept for breeding and warfare, the Dathomiri Zabrak Nightbrothers were confined to the outlying villages of Talzin's domain.

"Clearly, Mother," Kycina said, shifting her gaze from the screen. "But why do you bring this to my attention?"

"This one's markings suggest that he is of the same clan as Savage Opress and Feral." Talzin's eyes narrowed perceptibly. "You birthed him, Sister, and somehow you allowed him to be taken from us."

Kycina squared her narrow shoulders, but her face had lost what little color was natural to it. "Why would I do such a thing?"

The words had scarcely left her mouth when a gesture from Talzin levitated Kycina a meter off the ground and bent her backward, arching her like one of the surrounding plants, so that her ashen face was tilted to the red sky.

“Indeed, why would you do such a thing?” Talzin said, circling her.

Kycina grappled with the spell Talzin had cast, straining to speak. “Did you, Mother, not allow Asajj Ventress to be taken from us?”

Talzin’s sentinels brandished their bladed energy weapons. “Blasphemy,” one of them said.

But Talzin ordered her to fall back, and continued to circle the suspended Nightsister.

“When I gave away infant Ventress, I did so to protect the sanctity of our coven. Had I not, Hal’Sted’s Siniteen slavers would have waged war on us, and Dathomir would have suffered.”

“You accepted payment,” Kycina struggled to say. “At least I took nothing in return.”

“So you admit it.” Talzin came to a halt.

Kycina’s eyes found Talzin’s. “I wanted to save him from you. To save him from a life of enslavement and war; to save him from being fodder for your arcane campaigns. You already took Savage and Feral from me. I wanted a different life for Maul.”

“Then you failed, Sister, for that is precisely the life into which Maul has been delivered. To whom did you give him?”

Kycina squeezed her eyes shut. “I didn’t learn his name. An elegantly dressed human I encountered in Blue Desert City. Influential—and powerful in his own right.”

Talzin grew pensive. “Evidently, that one didn’t appreciate your gift. Your offspring was handed on to a Falleen who trains spies, mercenaries, and gladiators.”

Kycina blew out her breath. “No matter. So long as he’s out of your reach.”

“Don’t be too sure.” She cut her eyes to the Nightsisters who had found Kycina. “Lock her away until I devise a suitable punishment.”

Another pass from Talzin and Kycina fell like a stone to the ground. When the Nightsisters had dragged her away, Talzin turned to the offworlder. “Normally I could be persuaded to excuse such a transgression, but not with a Nightbrother of such martial prowess.”

“Stands to reason,” the offworlder said.

Talzin appraised him. “I appreciate your bringing this information to our attention, but your reason for doing so is anything but transparent.”

“Maul isn’t simply another adolescent trainee,” the man said. “I think he might be an agent, inserted into Trezza’s school by some Republic faction or the Jedi Order. Periodically he leaves the school, probably to meet with his control.”

Her eyes fell on the tattoos emblazoned on the off-worlder’s thick arms. “You display the shriek-hawk—the mark of the Mandalorian warriors.”

Meltch inclined his head in response.

“Why, then, haven’t you eliminated Maul on your own?”

“Maul is Trezza’s pet.”

“And you don’t wish to put your business relationship with the Falleen at risk.”

“Right again.”

Talzin considered it. “Benefits of a mutual sort will follow from our actions.”

“You’ll send your Nightsisters to Orsis to reclaim him?”

“I wouldn’t entrust this to anyone but myself.”

Meltch blinked in genuine surprise. “Then let me play a part. You’ll need to transit through Orsis Orbital Station, and you’ll need access codes to continue

down the well to the academy. I can supply everything you need, and I know precisely where you can capture him, without his even being missed.”

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Maul was completing his seventh major kill in as many local days when the freak storm blew in.

Dropping from the canopy of an ancient tree onto the biped’s humped back, he had plunged the enhanced vibroblade again and again between the armor plates that protected its long neck, until the creature had dropped on its side to the ground. By then most of the fight had gone out of the beast, and yet it had managed to snap its powerful jaws at Maul when he rolled clear. Springing forward, he delivered the killing stroke, and the plaintive cry that bellowed from the creature’s mouth had reverberated from the palisades and sent avians perched in the nearby trees scattering.

Distant cries from the beast’s cohorts had echoed the dying creature’s, and then lightning cracked open the sky and teeming rain and hail had burst forth. The fact that Maul’s week-long and mostly sleepless transit of the Gora was nearly finished made the storm feel even more personally punishing.

The Gora crater was the aftermath of a volcanic explosion that had tipped Orsis from its original axis and rendered the planet’s northern hemisphere habitable. An immense basin of dense forests and vast swamps—and even a low, central mountain that was the reemergent volcano itself—the Gora was home to countless species of animals that had found their way into it millennia earlier. The near vertical circumference and treacherous air currents had prevented all save the strongest avians from escaping. The remainder had been left to evolve in their own fashion in an environment that was less a landscape than an arena, a festering cauldron in which the struggle for survival never ceased.

Of Maul’s many kills there, only one had been for sustenance—the others had been for survival or sport. No matter what Trezza or Sidious said about the importance of being able to triumph in the profane world, the dark side couldn’t simply be dimmed down like some glow rod outfitted with a dampener. None of the creatures with whom Maul clashed had exercised restraint; they had attacked and defended themselves without reservation. They simply were their nature. Which made Maul wonder: Was he expected to rise above his nature? Was the exercise of restraint a way for him to better understand his true nature?

Did the dark side only want beings who were capable of rising above themselves?

Such had been his inner tempest. Now he was in the middle of a genuine storm, and it was as if it had been engineered to pose one final challenge before he reached the rustic outpost from which he could call for an airspeeder evac. It wasn't unusual for squalls to blow across the Gora, swelling the waterfalls, sluggish rivers, and bogs, but this one meant business. One moment the eastern sky had been clear; the next, it was a frenzy of ominous clouds. He thought about holing up, but the wind and relentless rain forced him to trudge on. Behind him, trees were toppling, and overhead, clouds of displaced insects swarmed.

Eventually the storm began to abate, dwindling to fat droplets of rain as he emerged soaked to the bone from a thorn forest onto an expansive savannah. The wind, too, died down, but in its place a sound of heavy footfalls filled the ozone-rich air. Llan beasts, Maul determined after a moment. Perhaps the very ones that had responded to the death call of his most recent kill. Yanking the vibroblade from the sheath strapped to his upper leg, he scanned the grasslands around him, searching for wood from which he might shape a lance. Finding nothing useful, he made a dash for the distant tree line. Perhaps catching the scent of him on the dying wind, the still unseen beasts changed direction with him, and their movements puzzled him, since most of the Gora's largest creatures—even those that were semi-sentient—tended to be solitary rather than herd animals.

So it was remarkable when, halfway to the forest, a quartet of llans leaped into the clearing—two in front of him and one to either side. What was even more remarkable was the fact that each llan was being ridden! The riders were slim figures dressed in red hooded garments, and they were armed with energy bows and pikes. Were they what Kilindi had wanted to warn him about before he had set out on the solo? Maul doubted it. He could sense that the riders were not trainees from the academy, but far more dangerous beings.

The dark side began to well up inside him, feverish for expression. No matter all the blood he had spilled, the dark side's lust for violence had yet to be sated. But at the edge of giving free rein to his powers, he held back. Rather than being part of the usual ordeal, the beast riders could have been sent by his Master to test his resolve.



Radiant quarrels flew at him from energized bows, though not aimed to strike so much as to move him toward a llan that had separated from the rest—a large spotted male whose spined tail was flicking back and forth in anticipation. If capture was once more the objective, then surely Sidious was behind it. Reversing his course, Maul was dodging arrows when he was abruptly knocked backward and completely off his feet. It was as if he had run straight into a wall; but instead of being thrown onto his back, he found himself suspended and immobilized a meter above the ground. His eyes provided him with an upside-down image of a tall figure, dismounting from the snuffling llan to approach him. A human female whose pale face was as blemished as his was marked by tattoos, and from whose thin neck dangled a trove of amulets and talismans.

“Don’t resist, Nightbrother Maul,” she intoned in deeply accented Basic. Her hands moved in a ritual way.

An agent of Sidious, he decided, for he could perceive the Force in her. In league with his Master, or perhaps an apprentice.

He tried to say as much, but then she touched him on the forehead and he was plunged into unconsciousness.

\* \* \*

Orsis Orbital Station consisted of two oblong pods linked by several cylindrically shaped concourses. In the control tower of the pod dedicated to the arrival and departure of cargo vessels, the traffic controller swung to a group of beings gathered at the observation bay.

“The drop ship is returning. The blue tri-fin is just coming into view.”

Meltch glanced at the ship. “Direct it to cargo bay five, and send a message that all non-essential personnel should leave the area.” He waited for the controller to carry out the command, then turned to the warlord. “Your troops are in position?”

Osika Kirske’s huge head bobbed. A Vollick from remote Rattatak—where warfare was a way of life—Kirske commanded a vast army, but had come to Orsis with scarcely three score of Weequay and Siniteen mercenaries.

“You’re confident the legion is adequate?” Meltch asked.

“It is comprised of some of my finest warriors.”

“They had better be.”

Kirske’s enormous shoulders heaved in disregard. “How, Meltch, were you able to lure the Nightsisters off Dathomir? I was told that it is rare to find them even outside their native land. Hal’Sted was only able to take possession of infant Ventress because Talzin feared exposure.”

“Word has it that Ventress has turned into quite the warrior,” Meltch said, ignoring the question.

The sharp planes and angles of Kirske’s gray face contorted. “We’ll soon see how young Ventress fares against those of her own kind.”

Meltch thought about it. “Good luck breaking them. Now that I’ve met the Nightsisters, I plan on steering clear of Dathomir. But, then, you’re not paying me to advise you.”

Kirske grunted. “Advice from a Mandalorian is always welcome.”

Meltch took the compliment in stride.

“A few years of fighting in the Cauldron arena and the Nightsisters will be begging to serve in my army,” Kirske added. “But the question still stands: how did you entice them here?”

“They came to collect one of their own,” Meltch said at last.

Kirske’s oblique eyes widened as much as his bony brow permitted. “Trezza has been training a Nightsister?”

Meltch shook his head. “A Dathomiri Zabrak male from a clan of Nightbrothers. The women use the males for breeding and as soldiers.”

Kirske’s gaze shifted to the approaching ship. “What would you have us do with the Zabrak?”

“He’s yours. I’m throwing him in for free.”

Kirske looked confused. "We can at least add something to what we've paid you."

Meltch smirked. "That's not necessary. You'll be doing me a favor just by taking him off Orsis."

\* \* \*

Feeling as if he had been robbed of the Force—not unlike the way he occasionally felt during his training sessions with Sidious—Maul surfaced groggily from the trance the witch had engineered. Even before he opened his eyes, his senses told him that he was aboard a small ship.

In fact, he was reclined in an accelerator chair. His vibroblade sheath was empty, but such was the witch's belief in her female soldiers and in her own powers that Maul wasn't cuffed or shackled.

"You are skilled, Maul," she said when his yellow eyes focused on her, "but perhaps not as skilled as I was led to believe."

Maul sneered. "That seems to be the common opinion lately."

She appraised him. "Very revealing. A few moments ago I was thinking that I erred in coming so far and in risking so much to return you to your clan brothers. And yet I sense that you are strong in the Force."

"I have no brothers," Maul said, as if spitting the word.

"Ah, but you do. And once among them your life will be very different. On Dathomir you will be nurtured and trained as the Winged Goddess and the Fanged God meant you to be trained. When the time is right you will face the Nightbrothers' equivalents of the Tests of Fury, Night, and Elevation. And should you pass those trials, you may be fortunate enough to be transformed into an extraordinary warrior. Your strength will be enhanced tenfold, and those puny horns that stipple your head presently will become long and lethal."

Maul had stopped listening almost immediately. The Witch was playing her part in a plan Sidious had designed. He had said that beings would attempt to use and deceive him, and here the Witch was doing just that.

"I won't be going to Dathomir."

The witch cocked an eyebrow. "You've no interest in seeing your birth world or meeting the members of your Nightbrother clan?"

"Neither."

She looked disappointed. "You are fated to serve us, Maul, one way or the other. It has always been thus."

"I serve only one Master," Maul said.

The Witch smiled without mirth. "The Falleen you answer to will have to find another."

Maul thought he had provided the correct response, but clearly he hadn't, or Talzin had completely missed the reference. He considered mentioning Sidious by name, but thought better of it.

One of the Witch's confederates slipped into the cabin. "Mother Talzin, we are approaching the station."

Talzin nodded and studied Maul. "Can I trust you to behave while we transfer to our vessel, or do you wish simply to awaken aboard it?"

Maul glanced at the young female's short sword and energy bow. "For the moment, you have the upper hand. I won't make trouble."

"Of course you won't."

Maul was comforted to learn that the station was none other than Orsis Orbital. As a tractor beam was easing the drop ship into the cargo bay, he decided he would show his Master that, until Sidious said otherwise, Orsis would remain Maul's home. But a sudden feeling of apprehension took precedence over his plan. Talzin must have sensed something as well, because she turned to look at him while he was accompanying her and the Nightsisters down the drop ship's ramp, perhaps thinking he was the cause of her concern.

"Trouble," Maul told her.

Without so much as a word from Talzin, the three Nightsisters drew their swords and enabled their energy bows. The dimly illuminated docking bay appeared to be deserted, but Maul could perceive the presence of armed beings lurking in the dark periphery. Regardless, Talzin continued to march into the open, as if without a care.

“Stay right where you are and lower your weapons,” a gruff voice barked in Basic over the cargo bay loudspeakers.

The beings Maul had sensed began to edge from the shadows, contingents of top-knotted Weequays and big-brained Siniteens armed with blaster rifles. At the center of the group stood a towering Vollick clad head to foot in garish battle armor.

“You won’t be returning to Dathomir, Mother Talzin,” the Vollick said. “The five of you are going to be my guests on Rattatak, where you will eventually become members of my elite army.” He drew an outsize blaster from its holster and triggered a shot toward the bay’s tall ceiling.

“Our weapons are set on stun, but we’ll shoot to kill if you decide to refuse my invitation.”

Talzin didn’t bother to reply. With a motion of her hands, the docking bay was suddenly filled with dozens of Nightsister warriors, though sporting robes and weapons that struck Maul as of ancient design. He understood that he was being treated to a dazzling Force illusion, but the Vollick’s soldiers were fully taken in. Just as the warlord had warned, the selector switches of a dozen blasters went from stun to full on, and a harried storm of bolts began to crisscross the bay, putting everyone in jeopardy.

The real Nightsisters were as fast on the draw as their opponents, and managed to drop several soldiers with energy quarrels before Talzin’s conjured illusion of ancient warriors began to evaporate into the same recycled air out of which they had appeared. Emboldened then—and ignoring the Vollick’s commands for cease-fire—the Weequays and Siniteens charged, dropping one of the Nightsisters and wounding Talzin in the thigh.

Maul thought about racing back into the drop ship, but doubted that it had sufficient power to overcome the bay’s tractor beam array. Instead he made a

mad run for the fallen Nightsister, leaping, whirling, and tumbling across the deck until his hands seized on her energy bow.

Retreating to the ship, he took cover behind one of the landing struts and began to return fire.

If this was a test, he thought, it was for keeps.

Several meters away, Talzin was flat on the deck with the two remaining Nightsisters unleashing a dark-side barrage of arrows, many of which were finding their marks.

Maul scanned the cargo bay. Having passed through this station on several occasions—typically en route to extrasystem contests arranged by Trezza—he knew that its cargo and passenger hubs were linked at several points by airlock corridors. If he could make it to the passenger pod, he could commandeer a drop ship and be back on Orsis before anyone even discovered that he was missing. But it would be easier said than done if he had to continue playing by the rules his Master had laid out.

He was preparing to make a break for the nearest hatchway when Mother Talzin called to him.

“Don’t leave us, Maul!”

He turned to see that she was on her feet, supported by one of the Nightsisters while the other was covering them.

“Maul!” Talzin repeated.

Confliction paralyzed him. Would his Master expect him to show sympathy? Even if the test had gone awry, Talzin might still be one of Sidious’ agents, and thus deserving of his help. Did the dark side of the Force ever permit self-sacrifice?

Cursing through his gritted teeth, he put his right arm through the bow and hooked it over his shoulder, then ran through a hail of blaster bolts to reach Talzin. Heaving her over his shoulder, he raced for the safety of the adjacent bay, the two Nightsisters steps behind.

\* \* \*

"She's dead," one of the leather-faced Weequays reported as Warlord Osika Kirske approached the fallen Nightsister.

The Vollick's massive right boot caught the lean humanoid under the chin and lifted the Weequay a meter off the deck.

"There were too many of them," another Weequay tried to explain, only to take a gauntleted fist straight to the face.

Kirske then turned to the few soldiers who remained standing. "The Witch achieved the impossible: she made bigger idiots of you than even I believed possible!" His eyes went to the hatch through which Talzin and the others had fled. "They'll attempt to reach their ship. Intercept them! And try to leave me with at least one witch in working order. We'll rendezvous in the passenger hub."

Close by, Meltch watched Kirske's mercs hurry off. "I tried to warn you," he said. "Now you've got a fight on your hands."

The Vollick made a guttural sound. "We Rattataki live to fight."

Meltch nodded. "One final piece of advice, then: send for reinforcements."

"You're leaving?" Kirske said to the Mandalorian's back.

"I've done my part, Warlord," Meltch said over his shoulder. "This is your mess to clean up."

\* \* \*

The entrance to one of the station's cylindrical connectors was scarcely 50 meters away, but Maul and the three Dathomiri were pinned down behind a cargo container by fire from the Vollick warlord's reinforcements.

"Our magicks don't work in this sterile place," Talzin said with abhorrence. "That's why I could not sustain the illusion."

Blaster bolts were ricocheting from the container. The two Nightsisters were returning fire.

"The illusion that nearly got all of us killed," Maul said.

Talzin took her hand from the deep black-edged groove in her outer thigh and winced. Maul regarded the wound in stony silence. Black against red, like the zigzag markings on his face and head.

"On Dathomir I would be able to heal myself."

"No one asked you to come here," he said, even though that might not have been the case.

"We came for your sake."

That much was a lie and he said so.

Talzin's silver eyes flared. "You fail to grasp that you belong to a great heritage, Maul. That you were spirited away from Dathomir doesn't alter the fact that you are a Nightbrother, and that your fate is joined with ours."

He snorted. "Everyone has a plan for me."

She searched his fearsome face for clues to his meaning. "I don't understand," she said at last.

But Maul had fallen back into silence.

In the empty space between the cargo container and the soldiers, a dozen automated load lifter droids were hauling similar containers to various designated areas on the burnished deck, unfazed by the firefight taking place in their midst. The containers were drifting into the bay on powerful tractor beams from a cargo ship too large to be berthed inside the station. The entire process was under the guidance of a computer housed in the bay's upper tier control room.

Maul spent a long moment observing, then said: "We've one chance to make it through the connector and into the passenger pod." He fixed Talzin with a penetrating gaze. "I'm going to need one of your energy swords."



Talzin returned the look. "You've no training in the use of that weapon."

Maul shrugged out of the bow. "I'll just have to improvise."

\* \* \*

Trezza and Sidious stood in the tall grass of the savannah where Maul had last been seen. The landspeeder that had carried them into the Gora was parked nearby. A strong wind tugged at their robes, and they had to converse loudly to prevent their words from being carried away.

"We were tracking him until the storm blew in and destroyed most of the remote cams," the Falleen was saying. "By then he was close to the outpost, and we expected him to comm for evac before nightfall." He paused, then added: "No one I've trained ever fared as well on a solo."

"And yet Maul has vanished," Sidious said.

"The search party I dispatched was able to track him to this point," Trezza said, "but there's no evidence of his trail from here on."

Sidious scanned the savannah and the far tree line. "Maul wasn't alone."

Trezza followed Sidious' gaze to areas where the grass had been disturbed and flattened. He nodded. "Ilans made these. The trackers were able to identify the prints of four different beasts."

Sidious turned slightly toward him. "Here ... simultaneously?"

"Apparently."

"You suspect that the Ilans had something to do with Maul's disappearance?"

"There's no evidence to confirm that. But there's no arguing that Maul and the Ilans were here at the same time."

The relationship between the Falleen and the human went back eight years, to when Sidious had executed Darth Plagueis' order that Maul be relocated from Mustafar to the Orsis combat academy. That first visit, Sidious had come in

disguise. Now he merely hid his visage deep within the raised cowl of the robe. Sidious trusted the Falleen implicitly, and saw no reason to doubt him now. Still, the idea that a quartet of Ilan beasts could overcome Maul was preposterous.

“When have you ever known Ilans to act in concert?”

“Never,” Trezza said.

Again, Sidious looked around, turning through a full circle. “This storm ... ”

“Also something of an anomaly. Whipped up out of nowhere.”

Sidious was silent for a long moment. “Have any ships come or gone?”

“Not from the crater. The academy spaceport has seen the usual traffic.”

“Supply drop ships,” Sidious said.

“Precisely.”

“Are any other trainees or instructors absent?”

Trezza thought about it. “Meltch has been away on business for a standard week, but he’s expected to return later today.”

Sidious touched his cleft chin. “The Mandalorian.”

“Could Maul have fled?” Trezza asked carefully.

Sidious pivoted to face him, staring from the darkness of the hood. “How do you mean?”

“Could he have reached his limit with ... the training?”

“And decided to cover his tracks after completing the most brilliant solo you have ever witnessed?”

Trezza looked away. “I’m only suggesting a possibility. Maul wouldn’t be the first to do so.”

“It’s unlikely that Maul would flee the only real home he has ever known.” Sidious lifted his face to the sky. “Tell your trackers to call an end to the search. I will pursue this matter personally.”

\* \* \*

Short sword in hand and evading bolts from Weequay and Siniteen blasters, Maul sprinted for the control room bulkhead. For a moment it appeared that he intended to run up the wall, but instead he launched himself straight up from the deck when he was a few meters short of the bulkhead. At the same time he raised the sword over his head in a two-handed grip and plunged it into the control room’s broad transparisteel window. A normal blade would simply have bounced off the transparency, but energized by the dark side of the Force the Nightsister’s sword not only penetrated the pane the way a lightsaber would, but opened a vertical tear in the window as gravity struggled to return Maul to the deck. Dangling from the weapon’s hilt, he rode with it for a short distance, then swung his body up and around the sword, bringing his feet in front of him and slamming them against the pane. That the gambit worked, however, owed less to the amount of momentum Maul was able to supply, and more to the concentrated blaster fire provided by the Vollick’s warriors.

Feet first, Maul flew through the smashed window into the control room, with dozens of blaster bolts following him through and ricocheting wildly. Several devices in the room were struck, and, as circuits fried, the small space began to fill with acrid smoke. Crawling below the ruined opening, Maul moved to the computer’s main control board and began doing input on a touch screen. He was by no means an expert slicer, but Trezza placed as much importance on computer skills as he did on poison production and assassination techniques. More important, slicing into the programs that oversaw Orsis’ automated cargo transfer system didn’t require the skills of an expert.

With bolts continuing to streak into the room, Maul worked his way into the program that managed the tractor beam array and retasked it. The system kept asking him if he was absolutely certain that he wanted the changes applied, but once he had convinced it, the consequences were almost immediate.

Where moments earlier cargo containers had been floating gently into the bay, they were suddenly soaring in at rapid speed. The large vessel parked outside the station was unaffected by the increased pull of the tractor beam, but the containers themselves were arriving too quickly for the load lifters to handle.

Instead, they were piling up on the deck, erecting what amounted to a towering wall between the mercenaries and the Nightsisters, though without preventing the latter from being able to reach the connector leading to the facility's passenger hub.

Grasping the eventual outcome, several of the soldiers broke from cover in an attempt to make it to the far side of the cargo bay, only to end up crushed by incoming containers. A couple of the load lifters also wound up hemmed in, becoming part of an impromptu partition that was close to spilling out of the pressurized bay.

With enemy attention diverted to the wall, Maul was able to leap safely from the control room to the deck and return to Talzin's side.

"Technological magic," she said, though not without a hint of appreciation.

Maul helped her to her feet and wrapped his left arm around her waist.

With the Nightsisters bringing up the rear, the two of them hurried into the corridor and through the first of several hatches: Maul using the Force to open it as they approached, Talzin using the Force to close it, and the pair of Nightsisters using their energy quarrels to destroy the control panel. All the way through the connector, their teamwork was repeated. Maul wasn't sure if his actions would ultimately be seen as inspired or ill-conceived. But his belief that he was being tested was given credence as he and Talzin were passing through the final hatch and into Orsis Orbital's passenger hub, and the revelation was so powerful it stopped him in his tracks.

"Why are you waiting?" Talzin said. "Our ship isn't far."

"You can stop pretending," he told her.

She gave her head a confused shake. "About what?"

"About Dathomir, the Nightbrothers, and the rest. I know that you were sent by my Master."

She stared at him in puzzlement.

"I know, because I perceive him. My Master is here."

\* \* \*

Sirens wailed throughout the passenger hub, and emergency lights brought a scarlet glow to some of the concourses and hangars.

Sweating profusely beneath his body armor, Warlord Kirske paced behind the soldiers he had deployed in a bay at the far end of the connector his four quarries were said to have entered. Other soldiers had been ordered to engage station security, and a contingent of Weequay mercenaries had been dispatched to secure the Nightsisters' ship, just in case Talzin and the rest made it that far. That left a mere skeleton crew aboard Kirske's own starship.

Considering the ruination the Dathomiri Zabrak had engineered in one of the cargo bays, Kirske had begun to wonder if it was he who had been set up. Meltch had been almost dismissive about the so-called Nightbrother, and yet Trezza's Dathomiri trainee was proving to be more dangerous than Mother Talzin herself. Could the Mandalorian have cut a separate deal with some other Rattataki warlord to draw him into a trap? Certainly Kirske had no shortage of enemies on the contested world.

Kirske glanced in the direction of the connector egress and whirled on one of his Siniteen lieutenants. "What's taking them so long? Why haven't they exited? And why is it so kriffing hot in here?"

Carefully, he wedged a clawed finger into the ring collar of his tunic and gave it an outward tug, hoping to release some of the heat that was building up under his breastplate. The leathery scalps of the Weequay nearby were beaded with sweat.

"My lord, our forward scouts report no sign of them," the Siniteen said at last.

Kirske tried to sharpen his view of the connector egress, but found his distance vision slightly blurred. To his eyes, the far side of the bay looked as if it were obscured by fog. The optical illusion may have been the result of sweat running into his eyes. Or perhaps not. Just in case, he made note of the location of the nearest bay egress.

In a utility room below the bay in which Kirske's soldiers were deployed, Maul and the Nightsisters stood on a maintenance gantry several meters above the

room's flooded deck. The deluge owed to ruptures in the broad pipes that coursed overhead, opened by slashes from Maul's Dathomiri blade. As fast as the water gushed from the pipes, Talzin—motioning broadly with her arms—was turning most of it to steam, and clouds were beginning to rise through the slotted deck plates of the bay above.

"It won't be as powerful as the storm I conjured on Orsis," Talzin said, "but it should do."

Like Maul and the two Nightsisters, she was wearing one of the emergency respirator masks Maul had snatched from a nearby airlock after he and Talzin had both sensed the ambush awaiting them at the end of the connector. They had picked their way down into maintenance corridors that ran beneath the passenger hub's concourse level. Where earlier Talzin had been unable to bring her magicks to bear, her powers to alter water were apparently unaffected by the techno-sterility of the rest of the station.

Talzin continued to make magical passes with one hand, while the other dug deeply into a pocket in her robe. Mumbling in Dathomiri, she extracted a crystalline ampoule and began to fling its amber contents in the clouds of superheated steam. Motioning with both hands she swirled the clouds, directing them to rise more rapidly, as if blown upward by powerful fans.

The four of them waited until they heard coughing and retching sounds from above; then made their way to the end of the gantry and ascended a ladder that accessed the upper bay.

Victims of Talzin's soporific and near-impenetrable fog, the warlord's soldiers were stumbling about as if inebriated or bent over and vomiting onto the deck. The two Nightsisters waded into their midst with swords flashing. The few Weequays and Siniteens who hadn't succumbed fully to Talzin's strange brew opened fire with their blasters, but were quickly cut down. Leaving the swordplay to the masked Dathomiri, Maul tore into the Vollick's rear guard with fists and feet, bruising bodies and breaking bones as he fought his way to the warlord himself. Out of the fog came a hail of fire from the Vollick's close-in defenders, forcing Maul to hit the deck, bleeding from a bolt that had grazed his upper right arm. Clambering to his feet, he resumed the charge, but by then the warlord and his top lieutenants had beat a retreat through one of the exits. Only Talzin's voice kept Maul from giving pursuit.

“Our ship!” she called.

Waves of her hands caused the spreading mist to coalesce into a liquid sphere, which she then burst with a single magical pass, showering the deck with water. Yanking the respirator from her face and hurling it aside, she gestured in the direction in which the ship was berthed.

“Quickly!”

\* \* \*

Talzin hadn’t expected Maul to heed her command, and wondered as she ran why he was running with them. Did he actually intend to accompany them to Dathomir? She had begun to doubt that she had the power to subdue him a second time, or to persuade him to come. So what had changed? Had combat forged a primal connection of some sort? Or was he now prepared to accept his fate, despite what he had said about having perceived the presence of his Master?

Racing into the hangar, they saw that the deck was littered with fallen Weequays. None of the discolored bodies showed evidence of obvious wounds, but to a soldier they were dead. Clearly the Vollick had deployed them to keep Talzin and the rest from reaching the starship. Could they have turned on one another? She scarcely had time to consider it when she saw Maul come to an abrupt stop and drop to one knee with his head bowed.

“Master,” Talzin heard him say.

A human male stepped into view. Of average height, he wore a dark robe whose hood was raised over his head, concealing his face. Talzin could feel his power, not only in the Force, but in the dark side, as it was known to some. Even the Nightsisters could sense the man’s strength, and fell back a step in uncertainty, their energy bows aimed at the deck. For a long moment, he and Talzin regarded each other in portentous silence. Then the robed man gestured to Maul.

“This one does not belong to Dathomir,” he said in Basic, his words heavy with meaning. “He is mine.”

Talzin recalled what Nightsister Kycina had said about having given infant Maul to a distinguished, powerful human. "Then you didn't merely abandon him to the Falleen."

"On the contrary," he said.

She glanced at Maul. "You have trained him well."

In the shadows fashioned by the robe's raised hood, the man's hairless upper lip curled. "I don't need you to verify what I know to be true, woman."

"Of course," she said, though without a hint of apology.

He motioned to their ship. "You'll find the body of your fallen Nightsister aboard."

Talzin nodded her head in gratitude.

He folded his hands into the opposite sleeves of his robe. "Now, be gone from here before I have a change of mind."

Unaccustomed to taking orders, Talzin hesitated, but not for long, and ultimately gestured to the Nightsisters to board the ship. Alongside her, Maul was still kneeling with his head lowered. Casually she allowed her dangling left hand to graze the bloody wound that had been opened in his arm. Then she walked, limping slightly, to the boarding ramp. There she brought her left hand to one of the talismans that dangled from her neck, and impressed Maul's blood upon it.

With this, I will always know where to find you.

Acknowledging Maul's Master with a final glance, she climbed the boarding ramp and disappeared into the ship.

When the starship had departed, Sidious moved to an observation window that overlooked multihued Orsis. Maul followed, dropping into a kneeling posture and waiting for his Master to speak.

"You did well, Maul," Sidious said at last. "It pleases me that you showed restraint and betrayed none of your deep training in the dark side of the Force."



“I did so in the hope of one day becoming your apprentice,” Maul said.

Sidious turned partly from the view to gaze down at him. “Then consider yourself one step closer.”

Maul let out his breath in relief. “Thank you, Master.”

Sidious paced away from the window. “The time has come for you to learn certain things about the nature of our undertaking. As I told you, I have for more years than you have been alive been putting into motion the stages of a Grand Plan—a plan you may play a part in if you can continue to demonstrate worthiness and abiding loyalty. You should know, though, that this plan was not fully devised by me, and has in fact been in the making for a millennium. It springs from the minds of many beings, all of whom serve a great tradition.” He paused to look at Maul. “A tradition of far greater import than the Dathomiri brotherhood Talzin surely told you about. It is the tradition of the ancient order known as the Sith.”

Maul narrowed his eyes in thought. “You told me of the Sith when I was young, Master.”

“What I kept from you then is that I am the Sith Lord, Darth Sidious. My Master both named and conferred the title on me, and at my discretion, you may one day be afforded the same honor by me.”

Maul swallowed hard. “I will strive to prove my worth to you, Master.”

“Yes, you will,” Sidious said, then added: “From this point on I will begin to tutor you in the ways of the Sith, and gradually I will allow you to learn some things about my alter-ego, and about our ultimate purpose. For now, it must suffice that we are opponents of the Republic, and the sworn enemies of the Jedi Order. It will be our task to see the former brought down and the latter expunged from the galaxy. Where I will remain the guiding hand in this, it will fall to you to execute missions that could pose a risk to my position should the true purpose of our acts be discovered.”

Maul’s heart pounded.

“Nothing less than perfection will be sufficient, Maul,” Sidious said. “Do you understand?”

"I understand, Master."

"Then let's put that to the proof, shall we?"

Maul looked up. "Another test?"

Sidious's brow furrowed. "Another?"

"As you engineered with Mother Talzin?"

Sidious grinned faintly. "What happened on Orsis and aboard this station was not set in motion by my hand, Maul. In fact, you were betrayed by one who told Talzin where to find you, and then aided and abetted her plan to capture you."

Maul's eyes widened. "May I know the identity of my betrayer, Master?"

Sidious thought it over. Finally he said: "Meltch Krakko."

Maul gawked at him in surprise.

"Did Trezza know, Master?"

Sidious shook his head. "Trezza knew nothing. However, I fear that we may not be able to contain the damage that has been done. The Mandalorian knows too much, and though I have always trusted Trezza, we can't risk that word of your disappearance and all that followed may spread." He fell silent, touching his chin. "I will deal with the Vollick warlord. But it will be your task to deal with Trezza and the others at the school."

Maul gazed at him in question.

"They need to die, Maul. Instructor and trainee alike, to the last of them."

Maul's heart turned to stone. "I live to do your bidding, Master."

Sidious nodded. "And as long as you do, you will continue to live."

Maul reclined in the compact cabin space of the drop ship that was returning him to Orsis, the blue, white, and brown world filling the viewport alongside his seat, thinking about the task ahead.

He decided that he would miss Daleen and Kilindi, and Trezza especially. But he accepted that their deaths were essential to Darth Sidious' plan—a Grand Plan, in which Maul was now an accomplice. At any given moment there could be as many as five hundred beings at the academy, and he wrestled with ideas for ensuring that all of them died.

Sidious had forbidden the use of a lightsaber, but he had said nothing about exercising restraint. Maul looked forward to confronting Meltch, and of finally being able to demonstrate his full abilities to the Mandalorian.

### **38 bby**

#### **Galactic Battlegrounds: Attichitcuk Campaign**

Sometime between the years 59 BBY and 56 BBY, Alaris Prime, a moon of the gas giant Alaris, was rediscovered by Wookiee explorers from the planet Kashyyyk. The Wookiees, represented by chieftan Attichitcuk, petitioned the Senate of the Galactic Republic to give them the rights to lead a colonization effort on the moon. During the negotiations the Trade Federation, a galactic company, expressed interest in Alaris Prime, intending to use it as a trade center between planets like Kashyyyk, Kessel and Bimmisaari. However after two decades of slowly dispensing the rights the Republic gave Alaris Prime to the Wookiees, who began the colonization effort sometime between 39 and 36 BBY.<sup>[1]</sup> Despite being denied the rights the Trade Federation, along with newfound allies, Trandoshan slavers led by Pekt, sent its forces to Alaris Prime, and began constructing bases on it. In honor of his success in claiming Alaris Prime for the Wookiees Attichitcuk became one of the leaders of the colonists along with his son Chewbacca and nephew Shoran. Jedi Master Qui-Gon Jinn was also sent by the Jedi Council to oversee the Wookiees efforts on Alaris Prime. A large number of Wookiees, including workers and warriors, boarded the transport ship *Thalmussen* as well as three other ships, and headed for for Alaris Prime.

*"An unexplored world is a hostile world. I must help the Wookiee leader Attichitcuk to learn the lay of the land. Only then can we find an appropriate place to settle."*

—Qui-Gon Jinn

Attichitcuk was one of the first Wookiees to arrive on Alaris Prime, and upon landing he began scouting the area and set up a small camp, leaving behind markers so that his fellow Wookiees could find him easily. Shoran landed on the moon a short time later and did some scouting of his own and left behind more markers, but he halted when he encountered a damaged power core that had been built by the Trade Federation and attacked by gundarks, a species of predators on Alaris Prime. Chewbacca then arrived on the moon and, while being guided by Master Jinn, followed Shoran's markers until he reached the power core. Acting on Jinn's advice, the two Wookiees attacked the power core until it was destroyed, and then followed Attichitcuk's markers until they reached his camp. At that time the camp was then attacked by four gundarks, which were swiftly defeated by the three Wookiees. Shortly afterwards Trade Federation B1 battle droid OOL-2 discovered the remains of the power core destroyed by Chewbacca and Shoran and reported its destruction to the Federation's Viceroy Nute Gunray, mistakenly blaming the gundarks for the loss of the power core. Gunray ordered OOL-2 to locate the gundarks and execute them with the help of the Trandoshans.

The Wookiees began building more bases, with their next one being a command center manned by three Wookiee workers. Jinn aided these workers by instructing them on how to gather resources such as food, carbon, nova crystals and ore. The Wookiees also practised a drill in case of an attack by the gundarks where they would retreat into the command center and use its turret to fire at any attackers. Two more workers also arrived at the base to assist in gathering resources, as well as Chewbacca. Four gundarks suddenly attacked the command center at that time, and the workers used the command center's turret as practised in the drill earlier to defend the base. Enough resources were eventually gained to sustain the command center.

Jinn eventually decided that the gundarks needed to be exterminated in order for the Wookiees' colonization effort to succeed. At another base led by

Chewbacca, Jinn had the workers gather resources for a short time before instructing them to build a troop center to train warriors to fight the gundarks with. The Trade Federation however, had also decided to eradicate the gundarks and sent a squad of battle droids to kill them. Once enough troopers had been trained Chewbacca led his soldiers to attack the nest, but discovered the Trade Federation finishing off the gundarks. One battle droid ordered its comrades to attack the Wookiees, however they were able to fight back and destroy all of the droids. The attack at the nest rendered the gundarks extinct on Alaris Prime, and also alerted the Wookiees to the Trade Federation's presence on the moon.

Attichitcuk later decided to explore Alaris Prime more along with two other Wookiees to try to learn more about the Trade Federation. At another base run by Chewbacca, Jinn instructed the Wookiees on further techniques on gathering food, mainly through building farms and animal nurseries, as well as helping them improve their level of technology.

## **36 bby**

### **The Monster**

The monster was higher now. Fingers of white light stabbed down from above. A thick school of daggert broke apart in the monster's bow wave like wind-scattered steam.

One opee swam close and spat out its sticky capture-tongue. An instant later, the monster's tail swept back in mid-stroke, bashing the smaller fish on the side of the head. The dead opee sank belly-up into the dark waters below.

The second opee stuck to the hunt, drafting in the monster's wake. They swam above a row of rocky columns that guarded an underwater landscape of peaks and pits. Drifting curtains of green glie caught the light from above and sparkled as if they had been knitted from emeralds.

The opee swam high then jetted down like a dive-bombing bird, tearing loose a piece of the monster's back. The monster's booming cry would echo halfway

across the ocean before it dissipated. Blinded with rage and pain, the monster thrashed upwards with delirious effort.

It was quite surprised when it breached the surface.

The monster sailed through the air, wet skin glistening. Falling was a rare sensation for it. Landing hard on a solid plane was an utterly novel one.

Eighteen hundred tons of flesh hit the beach with a brain-splitting thud. Bones snapped like twigs under a soggy blanket. Stunned, the monster sucked unfamiliar air deep into its compound lungs. It pawed at the sand with its front claws, but could not move itself.

The monster had always been a creature of mystery and menace. Now it was helpless.

Yet something else was visible where the monster had scraped away the sand. Deep in the ground, bright against the black bedrock, the silver of scratched durasteel glinted in the morning sun.

The creature of myth had revealed a lair of shadows. Neither one had ever been seen by outsiders.

Before the day was done, that would change.

\* \* \*

"Panaka! I see him!"

The call broadcast tinnily in Lieutenant Panaka's ear through his helmet-mounted comlink. Heavy running steps thudded on the floor above Panaka's head, accompanied by the unmistakable brapp brapp of a blaster pistol. Panaka swore silently. They were supposed to capture the suspect, not kill him. Bialy knew her training better than that.

Panaka eased farther down the rickety wooden staircase, struggling to see in the darkness of the perfume cellar. Now that the situation had degenerated into a firefight, he regretted not being upstairs to act as Bialy's backup. But it had been his decision to split up and herd the target into an ambush. The tactic had been drilled into him at the Tracker's Guild on Tolan by a disciplined Zabrak he still

remembered with respect. Panaka hated to think the tactic might be flawed. No, he thought, the tactic is sound. If it fails, it is only because I have erred in applying it.

Panaka's boots touched softly on the staircase. The leather of his Royal Security Force uniform creaked as he brought his S-5 blaster pistol up under his right ear. Upstairs, things had gone eerily silent. He considered comlinking Bialy but didn't want to disrupt whatever advantage the silence might afford.

From above came a crash, a thump, a panicked comlink call - - "Panaka, he's coming, he's coming" - - and heavy slapping footfalls on the floorboards. Panaka brought his blaster to bear on the cellar door at the top of the stairs. His index finger hovered over the trigger for the anaesthetic dart shooter.

The sheer violence of the impact amazed him. With a terrific smash the door flew off its hinges. Panaka dropped face down on the stairs and brought his arm up over his head just as the door fell on top of him. The crushing weight of a body landed atop the door, then suddenly sprang off. Panaka grunted in pain at the squeeze, then shoved the door off the side of the stairs. He pulled himself into a crouch, gun in hand. The door hit the cellar floor with a clatter.

There was no sign of the suspect. The cellar of the Port Landien Perfumery was dark, with many concealed corners among the head-high bottle racks. But like all perfumeries, this basement was equipped with a drainage trough-it was how Panaka had entered the room in the first place to set up his ambush. If he didn't reach the trough before his quarry, the runner was as good as gone.

Panaka jumped off the side of the staircase. Holding his blaster in both hands he advanced quickly through the racks of ripening fragrances.

He was halfway to the drainage trough when the attack came. As he passed an alcove formed by three intersecting racks, what could have been mistaken for a pile of rags on the stone floor suddenly grew long arms with crooked fingers. Springing from its fetal crouch, a Gungan launched itself at his chest.

Panaka swung his pistol around, but the Gungan took hold of Panaka's wrists before he could bring his weapon to bear. Panaka fell backward, relaxing his body in mid-fall. He hoped to pull the Gungan into a flip, but unexpectedly crashed against a perfume rack. Broken glass and pungent liquid rained on him as he slid to the floor.

The Gungan, striking brown-and-yellow stripes defining his wiry physique, smashed Panaka's wrists against the cold floor. The S-5 skidded out of reach. The two opponents grappled in a floor tangle, muscles straining for leverage. Panaka suddenly pulled his left hand in and threw his weight over to the same side, triggering a roll that left him on top and the Gungan underneath. Despite the advantage he still could not free his arms from his attacker's vice-like clamp.

Panaka knew Gungans were strong. This one was apparently stronger than most. His wrists popped as the radius and ulna ground together. Panaka's face was a misshapen mask of strain and suffering. The Gungan grimaced right back at him. Their faces were mere centimeters apart.

With a wet crack, the Gungan's prehensile tongue exploded outwards. It smacked Panaka's nose with an agonizing snap and briskly withdrew. A second lightning jab swatted the soft flesh beneath Panaka's left eye, taking a piece of skin with it. The third tongue-jab hit Panaka's left eyeball and struck there. The Gungan, seeing the adhesive had set, began to suck its tongue back into its mouth.

Panaka did the only thing he could, jurling his head forward with all his strength, slamming it straight into the Gungan's snout. The force of the headbutt squashed the Gungan's elastic facial cartilage, forcing the top teeth against the bottom row with a loud snap. The tongue was caught in the middle. The Gungan howled in pain. Panaka slammed his head forward a second time, knocking his attacker right between the eyestalks. The Gungan relaxed his grip as his body went limp.

Holding one hand over his throbbing eye, Panaka slowly sat up. Behind him came the racket of Bialy descending the stairs.

Bits of broken transparisteel lay strewn across the floor like a minefield of ice. A lake of perfume pooled around his knees. Panaka wrinkled his nose at the smell, and was rewarded with a fresh trickle of blood from his nostrils.

They'd nabbed their target, but for now all Panaka could think about was a bandage and a shower.

\* \* \*



Sergeant Bialy loaded the groggy Gungan into the back of the Flash speeder and secured him with restraint webbing. Electronic shackles hobbled the suspect at his ankles and wrists.

Panaka had hoped the freshness of day would cheer him up, but the morning sun only irritated his swelling eye while the heat brought out the stink of perfume in waves that made him lightheaded. The scents he was wearing on his Royal Security Force uniform would have cost a monarch's riches if purchased individually, for the people of Naboo coveted perfumes in the manner with which other cultures valued fine wines. But the perfumery's carefully-crafted aromas of musk and millaflower were now dried in a single sticky mix across Panaka's leather jerkin, exuding an unidentifiable but definitely unpleasant scent.

Bialy pulled off her helmet and wiped one hand over her forehead as she walked over to Panaka. "Think we should get back to Theed? We're starting to attract an audience."

Panaka glanced up. The Port Landien Perfumery was located in the town's sparsely populated outskirts, but a farmer was leading a small boy by the hand over the nearest hill, undoubtedly to catch a glimpse of this unusual criminal. Panaka frowned. He was a Royal Security Force officer, not a carnival barker. Panaka climbed behind the steering yoke of the speeder and fired up the engines. The moment Bialy joined him in the shotgun seat, he jammed the accelerator and bounced onto the dirt road with a puff of dust.

The wind of their passage helped strip away the reeking bouquet that clung to him. Panaka looked back. Their prisoner was glumly surveying the scenery. "You think he had an accomplice?" he asked Bialy.

"Panaka, I already told you. I don't know." Bialy held out both hands, palms up. "I never fired. Somebody took two shots at me. If it was the Gungan, somehow he made the weapon vanish. And if it was an accomplice, the guy is nowhere to be found."

Panaka grunted. He hated to leave the matter unresolved, but the instructions from the Royal Security Force office in Theed had been clear-Captain Magneta wanted the suspect in custody at once.

A half-kilometer ahead, the tiny figure of a shaak tender came into sight, standing in the middle of the road and waving them to stop. Panaka scanned the green hills, wary of an ambush. He pulled the speeder to within twenty meters of the tender's flock and slowed to a barely perceptible crawl, ready to gun the engine at any sign of trouble. Giving the shaak tender the "go ahead" sign, Panaka watched the herdsman's balloon-bodied animals shuffle one-by-one across the roadway in front of him.

"Don't even think about it, Gungan," he called into the back seat. The Gungan didn't answer. Panaka wondered if the injury to his tongue had impaired his speech.

The shaak, shaggy with midsummer wool, ambled across the roadway. The shaak tender raised his hand in thanks as Panaka throttled back up to cruising speed. Bialy turned in her seat and returned the shaak tender's wave.

"So how about it, Gungan?" Panaka called. "You have a friend back there at the Port?"

The Gungan kept his voice low. "Mesa sayen nutten."

"You have a friend with a blaster?" Panaka flexed his hands on the steering yoke. "Trying to kill a Royal Security Officer is lightyears removed from vandalism and theft, friend. We can charge you with attempted murder of a royal protector. To a Naboo judge, that's one step removed from regicide."

The Gungan looked to Bialy, then to Panaka. "My no haven a blaster. Mesa doen nutten."

"We've got witnesses who reported a Gungan sneaking around their town," Panaka shot back. "Crimes were committed during the same period. Most people would peg you as the likely suspect."

The Gungan laughed. "To dem, mesa only crime tis bein a Gungan."

Panaka shook his head. Typical.

The cynical cheer drained from the Gungan's face. He spat out some blood. "Yousa no know what yousa doen," he said sadly.

Bialy turned in her seat. "What do you mean?"

"Yousa tink yousa doen right. Boot what yousa doen tis terribad."

"Care to elaborate?" Panaka offered.

"Not to yousa. No can trust yousa."

"Suit yourself."

The Gungan slumped down in the rear seat and heaved a sigh. "Berry bom bad for yousa world. Berry bombad for yousa."

Panaka scowled. "Is that a threat?"

"No no, tis no threat. Tis truth. Nutten yousa can do to change dat." He looked down at the binders that held his wrists. "Un now, nutten mesa can do neither."

\* \* \*

Scrip scrip scrip

Panaka held the pick between his thumb and forefinger, twisting it to reach the inside of the liquid-cable cylinder. The little cartridge normally held compressed spraymist which hardened into a continuous spool of rope when fired. Unfortunately, the cartridge gummed up easily.

Scrip scrip scrip

The sound seemed quite loud, here in the empty confines of the Royal Naboo Security Force's dispatch office. Panaka sat on the bench in front of his locker, last week's assignment board propped on his knees as a makeshift table. Sundry components of his S-5 blaster pistol lay scattered across the board's surface.

In fact, Panaka did not know which seemed louder - - the scrape of the pick or the whine as he exhaled through the bacta sheath on his broken nose. A smaller bacta patch covered the angry blotch beneath his left eye. The Palace healer who had treated him had ordered Panaka to take the rest of the day off. But Panaka had nothing he wanted to get home to. He sat alone in the room, content for the moment with the straightforward challenge of ungumming a

gadget. Light spilled into the room from a row of open windows, looking out onto a narrow avenue and a boathouse on the shore of the river Solleu.

Panaka placed the cylinder between his palms and rubbed them rapidly back and forth. Heating the cartridge often loosened the dried goo inside. He lifted the pick again and resumed the scrip scrip scrip of cleaning.

With a careful scrape Panaka pulled a curlicue of dried spraymist out of the barrel's inner workings. The cleansing complete, he began reassembling the puzzle pieces of his S-5. The blaster pistol was already a heavy weapon, burdened with two oversized scopes and an anaesthetic dart cartridge. If Panaka's prototype liquid-cable shooter were to ever become standard equipment it would have to be small enough not to interfere with the aiming and firing of the S-5. And it would have to stop gumming up.

Panaka was determined to make it work. A grappling hook on a liquid cable line would allow officers to rappel down buildings and evacuate the King in emergencies. His anti-terrorism classes had taught him that the difference between life and death was often a matter of seconds.

The door to the dispatch office shot up into the ceiling. DuKane, a rangy mustachioed officer with dark soulful eyes, walked through the entrance wearing a smile. His face lit up when he saw Panaka. "I just saw your Gungan, Panaka, so of course I had to come and see you." DuKane whooped with laughter. "And it's true! You look worse than he does!"

Panaka flashed a quick smile, tight and false. He said nothing.

DuKane pulled his helmet from his locker. "The perfume was a nice touch. I can still smell it from here. Reminds me of my grandmother."

"That perfumery lost dozens of bottles of Monticano-era stock." Panaka slid the S-5's auxiliary targeting scope into its holding bracket. "It's hard on the owners."

"Yeah, well stay out of trouble Panaka." DuKane headed for the door. "King Veruna's hosting a visitor from Coruscant. The offworlder is in with the captain right now. And they seemed to be real interested in your Gungan." Reading Panaka's skepticism, he added, "No joke this time. Keep on your toes." The door sealed behind him, leaving the room quiet once more. Panaka's shoulders visibly relaxed.

By their nature, security officers were a tight-knit crew. Forced to uphold a professional image among the citizens of Naboo, officers gathered together in the off-hours to blow off steam with ribald banter and wild practical jokes. This was the unseen culture of the stationhouse. It was a culture Panaka found completely alien.

It wasn't that he hadn't tried. But while Bialy fired off playful insults with ease, Panaka came across as stiff and counterfeit when discussing anything not directly related to his job. Panaka's fellow officers frustrated him in a way no enemy ever could. No matter how hard he studied, he would never be their after-hours buddy. No matter how long he trained, he could never regale them with far-fetched yarns over drinks in a tapcaf.

If he could not win their friendship, then he would earn their respect. Panaka had had years of elite offworld education. Most of them had never left Naboo. Through the sheer weight of his competence he would command their admiration, and he would reinforce it every day by never, ever deviating from a sterling example. He was a lieutenant now, but he would not be for long. And Captain Magneta, skilled as she was, could not be the head of the Security Forces forever.

Panaka aligned the magnetic bolt on the liquid-cable cartridge and snapped it into place. The prototype chamber sprouted from the S-5 like an outrigger pontoon, just above the barrel and slightly offset so it wouldn't block the scope. Panaka hefted the assembled weapon and sighted down its length, taking note of the added weight.

His comlink crackled. "Panaka here," he announced, holstering the S-5.

"Lieutenant, this is Captain Magneta. Report to my office at once."

\* \* \*

Like the woman who occupied it, Captain Magneta's office was stern and uncompromising. Completely bare save for a desk, chair, and a single family holograph, the room seemed more like a cell than a workplace. Panaka stood at attention, unacknowledged, while Magneta conferred in low tones with a man dressed all in black.

At last Magneta turned to regard him. A tall woman with hawk-like features, she kept her white hair pulled back in a short, tight braid. The brass plates on her Captain's uniform gleamed with fresh polish. "First, Lieutenant, let me congratulate you on your arrest. Naboo is safer because of your actions."

"Thank you, Captain," Panaka responded dutifully. "Of course I did not do it alone. Sergeant Bialy was my partner on this assignment."

"I expected you to say that, lieutenant, but I know you don't mean it." Magneta regarded him shrewdly. "Bialy is a fine officer, but I know your education. I recognize your strengths. Credit for the capture goes to you."

No response was required, so Panaka stayed silent. Magneta gestured to the man at her left. "This is Sate Pestage of Coruscant, special advisor to Naboo's own Senator Palpatine."

Trim and fit, with thinning black hair and a tight cruel mouth, Pestage looked like an exercise instructor forced to dress up for a funeral. His layered Coruscanti suit of business black would seem wildly out of place on one of the colorful avenues of Theed.

Pestage nodded at Panaka. "Lieutenant. The Gungan in custody has been identified as Kroke Modbom, wanted for crimes including treason and murder. He is being remanded to my custody and will be shuttled offworld within the hour. Senator Palpatine thanks you for your bravery and cooperation." Pestage shifted uneasily, looking for a place to sit down, but Magneta's office lacked guest chairs.

Panaka tensed and looked at Captain Magneta. "The Gungan is to be taken offplanet?"

"That's correct."

"This is a Naboo matter."

"And it will continue to be handled as such," Magneta responded with a touch of annoyance. "Senator Palpatine is a native of Naboo, in case that fact escaped you while you were offplanet yourself."

"With all due respect, Captain, the Senator is a politician. This is a Royal Security Force matter."

"Be careful, lieutenant." Magneta raised a warning finger. "You claim respect, yet you show none to me or to my office. The extradition orders have been signed by King Veruna. I serve the king. If you no longer obey the ruler of Naboo, then you have no right to wear that uniform."

"My apologies, Captain," Panaka said in a quiet voice, but he did not break gaze with Magneta.

Pestage cleared his throat to break the tense silence. "I know I speak for Senator Palpatine when I say Kroke's victims will be avenged. The killer will be brought to justice."

Panaka saw no advantage in arguing the point further. "Sergeant Bialy thought there was a second person at the scene. A possible accomplice."

"Yes, I read your report," Magneta answered. "And you will conduct a follow-up investigation into that matter as soon as you have completed your immediate assignment."

"Immediate assignment?"

"Traffic control. I realize the healers placed you off-duty, but a sea creature has run aground on a isolated stretch of coast north of Port Landien. I'd like you to command a small team of officers to divert pedestrian and vehicular traffic from the area for the public's safety until we can organize a disposal crew."

"Sounds simple enough. Another opee?"

"I suppose so, yes." Magneta held out her hand and Pestage placed a datapad in it. "Your squad won't be in the cleanup area. The carcass should be disposed of by nightfall, so just keep the vicinity secure until then. Orders are in this datapad. You are dismissed."

Panaka took the datapad and turned to leave.

Pestage stepped forward and extended his hand. "Good luck, Lieutenant, and thank you again. I will be returning to Coruscant in the morning."

Panaka accepted the other man's hand and shook it firmly. Pestage leaned closer, studying the bandages on Panaka's face. "Those injuries-do they hurt?"

Panaka shook his head. "I don't let them."

\* \* \*

The screeching rootjiggers were enough to drive anyone mad. Hillocks of nola grass flanked the roadway where Panaka stood, rust-tinged in the fading light of dusk. At the base of each nola stalk prowled a finger-sized rootjigger beetle. Panaka couldn't see any but he could hear them all, as they forced air through tiny holes in their shells in the hopes of attracting a mate. The jiggers only mated a few days out of each year but their squealing was always loudest at sunset.

Panaka looked down at his own lengthening shadow as it stretched along the road, nearly extending all the way to his Royal Security Force speeder. Parked sideways to block traffic, the speeder winked back at him with the flashing hazard light mounted on its hood.

Not that traffic's a problem, Panaka thought. Not only was this region unpopulated, but it was much too far from Port Landien to attract curious gawkers. Only a single road serviced the area, and Panaka hadn't seen any vehicles drive down it in over an hour.

Behind him the terrain grew rockier the closer it got to the water. Panaka threw a glance over his shoulder. Jagged upthrusts of land threw sharp black shadows in the orange light, while tufts of sharp-edged beach grass grew between flat tables of rock. The road he was standing on extended back in that direction for a kilometer, then veered left to follow the ocean coast down to Port Landien. By doing so it avoided a natural wall of serrated black rock fifty meters high. Behind that barrier, Panaka knew, lay the beached sea creature that was the reason for this dreary assignment.

Three other Royal Security Force officers, including Bialy, had also drawn this detail. Panaka had positioned them in a rough semicircle surrounding the zone but he couldn't see any of them behind the hills. A mild breeze blowing in from the shore tickled his scalp, and Panaka decided he was glad to have left his helmet in the passenger seat.



He saw the dust cloud approaching before he saw the other speeder. A battered green civilian model, the speeder slowed as its driver apparently caught sight of the roadblock. The setting sun glinted off its windscreen. Panaka wondered if the driver could see him amid the glare. He raised his arms, palms out, and motioned for the other speeder to stop as he slowly walked back toward his parked vehicle.

Several dozen meters distant, the speeder idled to a full stop. The dust cloud settled.

Panaka arrived at his own speeder and reached in the rear compartment for his datapad. The passengers-no, the single driver, Panaka corrected himself as he squinted-might need directions for alternate routes to Port Landien.

Dust billowed up suddenly. The green speeder shot forward as if kicked by a giant boot. Panaka froze for a split second, judging whether to draw and fire, but there was no time. He sprang away from the roadway, hit the grass, and rolled.

With a wrenching metal crunch even louder than the din of the rootjiggers, the suicidal vehicle plowed into the side of Panaka's speeder. The Royal Security Force speeder stubbornly fought the shove. An invisible tractor beam dug out a furrow of dirt as the vehicle skidded sideways. The roadway's resistance quickly overloaded the beam, and Panaka's speeder-suddenly unencumbered-bobbed away over the rocks.

The other speeder, front end crumpled and smoking, steered around chunks of debris and accelerated down the road toward the coast. Panaka rose to one knee and fired six quick shots. Several shots hit the rear gate but the speeder didn't stop.

Cursing, Panaka got to his feet and ran toward his speeder, which had floated to a stop a dozen meters away. "Bialy!" he yelled, keying the comlink clipped to his collar. "Pestrak! Dunni!"

He couldn't hear anything over the shriek of the jiggers. "This is Panaka," he announced anyway, hoping someone could hear him. "I'm in pursuit of a speeder that smashed through the roadblock. Green SoroSuub model, damaged front end, one driver. Call it in and get over here now!"

He reached the shattered Royal Security Force speeder and hopped inside, punching the ignition switch and exhaling in relief when the engines shuddered to life. Squeezing the steering yoke as if he could throttle the other driver just by willing it, he bounced over the uneven turf and steered back onto the roadway. Panaka opened up the throttle and the engines roared. The flashing hazard light on his hood still blinked weakly.

Panaka peered through the cracked windscreen for any sign of the other speeder. He was preparing to brace for the sharp left turn at the coastline when he suddenly caught sight of the green speeder, parked behind two coal black boulders at the foothills of the rise. Panaka jerked the steering yoke and slammed on the brakes, slewing the speeder around in a squealing stop that banged the passenger side against the rocks. He winced out of habit, but he could scarcely do any more damage to a vehicle that was already a total loss.

He leapt out, but the other speeder was empty. Panaka squinted up at the crest of the mount, ruby sunlight burning the corners of his eyes. Beyond that rim was where the beached animal lay.

The black rocks piled up above him, some crowned with a cap of moss, others split by prickly clumps of beach grass. There was no sign of the speeder driver, though Panaka admitted to himself that the attenuated shadows were deep enough to hide a small army.

He started to scale the slope, clambering over the polished rocks on hands and feet. The racket of the insects was gradually supplanted by the soothing sound of surf. Ten meters up, his boot slipped on a rock caked with bird guano. Panaka fell hard onto a jutting spar that broke his fall and nearly broke a rib. By the time he reached the top, salty sweat drenched his bandages and stung his sore eye. Running a hand over his face, Panaka blinked and gazed over the rim of the summit into the valley below.

Fully half a kilometer wide, the tidal basin was enclosed by high cliffs in a broad U-shape. During high water the cliffs would form a tiny bay, but at the moment the drained basin revealed a floor of black sand and glistening puddles. And smack in the middle, stark against the indigo carpet.

It was fantastic. And it was horrifying.

Panaka could not comprehend the size of the creature. His eyes picked out familiar details—a breaking wave, a circling bird—but, like an optical trick in which straight lines appear curved, he could not reconcile them against the backdrop of that thing. He experienced a brief moment of vertigo as his eyes struggled with his brain.

The thing lay splayed out on its side in the tidal basin, long and serpentine. Its submerged hindquarters were partly visible beneath the churning surf. The rest of the creature lay prone on the sand, its sagging flesh pulled down by the unaccustomed weight of air. Panaka was reminded of the cacodemons of Naboo folklore, that slithered up from the underworld and were struck dead when touched by the scouring rays of the sun.

A monster, he thought, and a dim memory corrected him. No, a sando aqua monster. Long theorized by cryptozoologists but never substantiated through hard evidence, the sando had a powerful pull on the popular fancy. To some it was myth, to others reality. Until now, Panaka had never held an opinion either way.

The monster lay in an agonizing still life. Foam broke over its submerged rear flippers. Its forelimbs, long and hooked, lay quietly near the deep furrows they had earlier carved into the sand. The snake-like neck was twisted like a corkscrew, leaving the head — the size of a house — inverted in a classic pose of death. The monster's mouth gaped open, startlingly white teeth shining like great slabs of salt.

Abruptly the monster moved. Shuddering, it heaved over and flopped down on its stomach with a tremendous thud. A gaggle of startled seabirds took to the sky.

The monster coiled its head around as if searching for the sun. Puddled water sloughed off its back in thin rivulets. Its haunch muscles spasmed, and far out to sea Panaka saw an answering splash as a tailfin breached the surface with a slap. Its claws scrabbled weakly in the grooves they had already gouged out, and then the sando aqua monster collapsed with a rattling roar.

Panaka didn't know how long he'd been standing there. But the swollen orange sun was already dipping behind the ocean's perfect horizon.

Panaka began clambering down the inner slope, eyes straining for safe footholds and signs that someone else had passed this way. The way down was even more hazardous than the ascension, for the rocks along the basin's inner wall were slick with seaspray.

Halfway down, he paused. Panaka took his eyes off his feet for a moment and squinted at the sand surrounding the monster. If the fugitive crossed that open stretch Panaka might be able to pin him down with long-range blaster fire. But even as the thought entered his mind, Panaka boggled at the absurdity of it all. What was the runner doing down here? Did he hope to lose Panaka in the vicinity of the body? He's panicking, reasoned Panaka.

Panaka didn't see anyone crossing the expanse. He did, however, notice that the sand covering the floor of the basin did not extend all the way up to the foot of the slope. There, amid agglomerations of rocks that had tumbled to the bottom over centuries of waves and wind, dark black cavities punctured the crust. Deeper than any shadow, they looked like yawning mouths beckoning him into the underworld.

Panaka was reminded of the unmappable honeycomb passages that riddled Naboo. The entire planet was like a melon gnawed hollow by a colony of hungry worms. Rock tunnels run underneath this whole stretch of coast, he thought. If he's gone in that warren I might never find him.

As if spurred by Panaka's unspoken pessimism, a white-garbed figure appeared below from behind a rock, silhouetted against one of the openings like a ghost.

Panaka unholstered his blaster. "Hold!" he shouted, and fired a shot into the air. The figure whipped around and looked up at him, but the distance and darkness were too great to make out any identifying features. "Hold!" Panaka shouted again.

The figure paused as if deliberating its options, then took a step into the gaping tunnel mouth. It fell straight down and disappeared in an eyeblink.

Panaka jammed his blaster back in its holster and scrambled the rest of the way down the slope. He slowed as he neared the tunnel mouth. His target, down in the darkness below, was shielded by shadow and could probably take him down with a single shot.

But Panaka was also apprehensive for less tangible reasons. Despite his training and his natural disdain for superstition, the idea of jumping feet-first into stygian blackness was downright unnerving. And to traverse the cold channels directly underneath the belly of a dying behemoth represented fear in its most primal shape. Panaka leapt into the unseen abyss.

\* \* \*

Panaka landed with a splash, blaster held tightly in his right fist. Immediately, he tucked into a ball and rolled to his left. But he heard nothing, and as his eyes adjusted he saw he was alone in a small rock chamber with a single exit.

Or was he? Along the weeping walls he saw several pale glowing orbs, each the size of his head. The dead clouded eyes clung to the rock and made sticky puckering noises as they focused on him.

Panaka had no idea what manner of creatures they were, but they disgusted him for reasons he could not explain.

A stricken bellow rumbled down through the entrance in the ceiling. The monster slapped some extremity against the sand overhead and the walls of the chamber reverberated. As if jolted from sleep, dozens more eye-creatures revealed themselves, uncovering their phosphorescent bodies one after the other with the wet sucking sounds of nursing babies. Panaka shuddered and ducked his head as he passed into the tunnel beyond.

The light from the orb-creatures dimmed quickly in the tight passage. Panaka considered switching on his field luma, but didn't want to destroy his night vision or paint too obvious a target for his quarry. He moved forward gingerly, testing the ground with each step.

A thin film of water covered the rock floor. Given their negative elevation relative to sea level Panaka had half expected these passages to be completely flooded.

The standing water made it impossible to scan for footprints. Panaka froze, halting his breathing, and heard the distant echo of splashing footfalls. He also heard a faint mechanical hum. A pump?

By this point he was in total darkness. As he reached for his luma with his free hand, he noticed a pallid glow far ahead. The light was encouraging, but between there and here could lurk overhanging stalactites or ankle-twisting pits. Risky as it was, he needed a quick snapshot of the terrain ahead. Left thumb poised over the kill switch, Panaka activated his luma.

A whistling shriek erupted from behind him, like steam squealing out of a burst pipe. Something struck Panaka between the shoulder blades and knocked the luma from his fingers. It splashed in the shallow water and winked out, dousing the tunnel in darkness once more. Panaka waved his blaster around blindly.

A second thing, hard and cold, smacked against his neck and nipped at the skin with needle-sharp teeth. Panaka slapped the creature away, but dozens more struck his face, his chest, his hands, his hair. Panaka stumbled ahead, brushing the nightmares away with clumsy sweeps of his forearms. Shrill hoots reverberated in the claustrophobic tunnel, unnerving and disorienting Panaka. His knee thumped a spur of rock and he tumbled, whacking his head against the ground with such force he saw stars. Panaka crawled forward, half aware, striking for the light.

Unseen creatures piled on his back, munching through the leather tunic and hanging on two and three deep, as if they were all trying to ride a kaadu. Panaka sloshed through the water, lurching forward on his hands and knees.

Dimly, Panaka saw that he had entered the illuminated tunnel. Weak as the light was, it seemed to be an abhorrence to the tiny biters. The hard-shelled creatures hissed and sprang off Panaka's back. With the clatter of a skeleton in a rock tumbler, they quickly hopped back into the blackness.

Shaking his head to clear it, Panaka lifted himself up from the floor and felt the cold pressure of a blaster barrel on the back of his skull.

"Hands up," came a harsh male voice. "And drop your blaster. You make me twitch, you lose your head."

Panaka did as he was ordered.

"Turn around," commanded the voice.

Panaka turned slowly and regarded his captor. Bald and paunchy, but with obvious muscles beneath the fat, the man was a good head taller than Panaka. His puffy face was dominated by a knob of a nose that looked as if it had been broken and reset many times without benefit of bacta. His baggy white clothing, stained with sand and sweat, draped loosely over his ample frame.

The man didn't lower the disruptor.

Carefully, Panaka laced his fingers behind his head. "You planning to use that?" He nodded toward the other man's weapon.

"Not unless you do something stupid. Though the way you handled yourself with those biters I already know you're not too bright."

Panaka didn't take the bait. "Whatever your intentions are down here, holding a Royal Security Force officer at gunpoint isn't going to make your situation any easier."

"Watch it, lieutenant," the man sneered. "Your partner isn't here to cover your back. I could shoot you right here for what you did to Kroke Modbom."

Panaka started at the name, then thought back to that morning's confrontation and Bialy's unseen shooter. "Kroke was a Gungan criminal," he answered smoothly. "Tell me what you are."

The look that crossed the man's face combined both disgust and pity. "Lieutenant, we're all criminals. Thank goodness we have officers like you to keep Naboo safe in the name of our king."

The cry of the sando aqua monster resounded through the meters of rock above them, much louder this time and laden with low thrumming bass notes as if most of the monster's call was below the threshold of hearing. Panaka felt the vibration through his boots.

As the noise died away, a powerful thud nearly knocked Panaka off his feet. The monster was thrashing. Sand - - or perhaps pulverized rock - - trickled down on his head through cracks in the tunnel ceiling.

The heavysset man glanced up anxiously. Panaka tensed, preparing to take advantage of the distraction, but his captor looked back quickly and shook his

head in warning. "Uh uh." He gestured with the disruptor. "Turn around and walk forward. Slowly." More rock powder spilled down from above in dry streams, making powdery cones in the shallow water. "But don't drag your feet. I wouldn't bet on this tunnel holding forever."

Panaka wondered how he was supposed to do both those things simultaneously, but kept quiet. "What's your name?" he asked instead.

"I'm called Veermok," the man barked, and punctuated the statement by jabbing Panaka's back with the disruptor pistol. "Start walking."

Privately, Panaka smiled at the ferocious-sounding nickname. Veermoks were bloodthirsty simians whose jaws could snap bone. "The Gungan give you that name?" he asked as he moved forward into the steadily brightening light.

The other man's voice conveyed loathing. "Let me hazard a guess, lieutenant - - you've spent more time riding in turbolifts than talking to Gungans. And I dare you to tell me otherwise." He paused as he picked up Panaka's S-5 from the floor. "You know nothing about Gungans, and you know even less about Kroke."

"I know he was a wanted criminal. What does that say about you?"

"I can't imagine. You tell me."

Panaka shrugged. "You know the saying. 'Veermoks run in packs.'"

"Not a wise thing to say to a man with a pistol at your back."

"That's not the way I see it." Panaka wiggled his fingers inside his leather gloves. "You had me dead to rights a minute ago. I think if you were going to kill me, you would have done it already."

The man gave a wintry laugh. "Lieutenant, you have no idea what we're doing down here, do you?"

"I know what I'm doing here," Panaka answered confidently. They had advanced into the full light of the new tunnel. Panaka saw his earlier suspicions confirmed. Banks of artificial illuminators hung from the rock ceiling at even intervals. At least a dozen lit up the tunnel ahead before the passage bent into a distant turn. Panaka still saw no evidence of a pump, but the underlying hum of machinery



was obvious. Grated metal deck-plates on the floor covered the few centimeters of dirty water that puddled underfoot.

Dark alcoves in the walls ahead indicated the presence of branching shafts. As Panaka passed the first of these subsidiary passages, he noticed it was blocked with a heavy durasteel door bearing a number in futhark script.

"Slow down," the man ordered. "Walk forward carefully, one step at a time. I'll be standing right back here." Panaka heard the familiar click of his blaster's intensity setting. "And remember, now I've got two pistols trained on you."

Panaka's gut went cold. "You think the tunnel's boobytrapped."

"Points for the lieutenant. Maybe you officers aren't all dense."

"So if I don't advance, I get shot in the back. If I do advance, I trigger an automated intruder device and get shot in the chest. So tell me again why you think I should to help you."

"Oh, come now, lieutenant," his captor mocked. "All that Security Force training and you can't defeat a simple ambush? Move. Now. We're wasting time."

Panaka flexed his hands. He was never more conscious of the missing weight of his S-5. He stepped forward carefully, boots echoing hollowly on the deckplates. On the walls, hundreds of tiny fungus buds created giddy pointillist patterns in phosphorescent green. Hairy roots ran along the face of the stone, crisscrossing the pale fungus like networks of blood vessels. Panaka passed several more tributary tunnels off to either side, some capped with doors and others disappearing into darkness.

"Mind telling me what I'm looking for?" Panaka eyed a numbered door warily.

"What do you think this place is? What does your Royal Security Force training tell you?"

Panaka craned his neck to look behind a hanging bank of overhead lights. An observation cam stared blankly back at him through its single lens. Corroded and dripping, the cam's electronics had obviously lost the battle against the tunnel's ubiquitous moisture. "A pirate's stash," Panaka answered. "A bootlegger's warehouse."

"What if I told you this was commissioned by King Veruna? That it contains records concerning corruption at the highest levels of government? Records that would shock even you?"

Panaka snorted. "I wouldn't think much. You see whatever you want to see. You're not the only anti-royalist on Naboo."

"Anti-royalist?" the man spat. "We're not out there carrying signs. Kroke and I and the others, we're fighting for Naboo."

"Then I've never heard of you."

"I'm glad. We're not striving to be noticed. We're not even an organization. We have no leader, no hierarchy. But when your friends start disappearing, people have a funny way of working together." He paused, then continued in a lower register, his words wrapped around a lump of sadness. "The Gungans were here before us. They can tell when their world is out of balance. All my life I've tried to sense that balance. Now we have the chance to restore it." Veermok sighed as if casting off a great weight. "So no, lieutenant, we're not anti-royalist. We're anti-lies. Anti-secrets."

Panaka felt a smile at the corners of his mouth. Idealists. "That's what everyone wants," he said, keeping his voice calm and able. "Including Veruna. Including me."

"You mean well, lieutenant, but you're a liar." Veermok's voice roiled with heated bitterness. "Korke and I have been looking for a repository like this one for years. Recent information led us to Port Landien, but we couldn't find it on our own. Naboo understood. The planet herself finally revealed this disease by sending the sando aqua monster. I am honored to accept her gift. If you're really sincere about wanting the truth, help me search. Help me make public whatever we find."

"Put down the pistols and we'll talk about it."

"Lieutenant, maybe I am a little naïve, but I've never been called stupid. Now stop stalling."

Panaka left the dead cam behind and reached another matched pair of branching tunnels. The passage to his right was capped by a door that read "WASTE STORAGE" in faded red printing. The tributary on his left stretched off into darkness. Peering closely into that gloom, Panaka thought he could make out the circular outline of a wide hole in the rock floor. Worried what the pit might conceal, Panaka sprang forward onto the deckplates a meter ahead and dropped to the ground as a ceiling illumination bank exploded in a shower of sparks, spitting out an energy bolt that hissed past Panaka's ear. The wrecked lighting rig fell to the ground with a crash, revealing a recessed laser turret in the ceiling. With a hyper-active whine the turret spun around in dizzy circles, spraying destructive energy everywhere. Panaka hurried backward on his belly, outside of the turret's apparent range, back to the intersection of the two branching tunnels.

His captor moved up behind him. "What did you do?"

"Draconi fixed defensive laser," Panaka stated flatly. "Can't tell if it's pressure or motion activated, so keep still."

The turret spun around madly in its tight circle, drenching the air with missiles of hot orange energy. Laser darts peppered the walls of the tunnel, leaving rows of black smoking holes, then burned over the heads of the two figures lying prone on the deckplates.

"I don't know," Panaka admitted, shouting over the sizzle. "I'd expect this one to track us, and it's not. It's old. And I think it's malfunctioning. " Like an airspeeder caught in a fatal spiral, the laser twirled around faster with each revolution. The turret mounting wobbled violently with the off-center stress. The laser's circular spray pattern now began to zigzag up and down the walls, in sync with the back-and-forth jerking of the pivot mount. Panaka gritted his teeth. Then he noticed that the rock surrounding the ceiling turret was glowing.

Plasma. Veins of natural energy plasma gushed deep through the core of Naboo. These were tapped with drilled shafts to generate power for major cities. Trace amounts of plasma sometimes permeated surface rock, useless for any practical purpose but fun to ignite for a short-lived light show. The out-of-control turret likely ran on its own plasma source, and was venting its excess heat directly into the saturated rock. The rock itself was unlikely to explode, but as the ceiling's temperature climbed the motor casing would melt, exposing its pure plasma battery to direct heat. And when that happened - -

"We're moving!" Panaka announced to his captor. "That laser's going to blow."

The man glared back at him. A pattern of dirt smeared one side of his face where he'd pressed it against the grated deckplate. "You're not going anywhere." He still held both pistols tightly in his fists.

"Take a look!" Panaka jerked his head toward the turret, angry. Vivid white lines spiderwebbed through the superheated red rock. Panaka peered into the branching tunnel on their left, where he'd earlier glimpsed a dark pit. "When the laser spins that way-" he motioned opposite their position-"we roll left, and scoot down that tunnel as far as we can." Panaka held up his hand. "On my signal. One-"

Panaka never finished his count as the world came crumbling down on them. He was flipped end-over-end, swept up in a jumble of rocks that banged him from every side. Time slowed down as Panaka became acutely conscious of his surroundings, in a sort of hyperconsciousness that intruded upon his senses in life or death situations.

He was in the air, spinning, falling. Yet there was no fire from an explosion. The laser turret hadn't blown. Above him he saw rocks large and small, suspended in the air in mid-tumble like himself. Beyond the rocks he saw a ragged patch of purple dotted with pinprick stars. Silhouetted against the incongruous night sky was a massive claw with talons the size of tree trunks, reaching deep into the ground as if digging for worms.

He hadn't been blown off his feet. He'd been scooped.

Panaka flailed his arms, trying to grab hold of something, anything to break his inevitable fall. As he twisted his body in mid-air he saw the rock floor rushing up at him. Panaka landed hard on his forearms. His legs sailed up and over, flipping him on his back and sending him into a dusty slide toward the ominous pit in the floor of the tributary tunnel. Panaka reached desperately for one of the dangling, hair-like roots that draped over the lip of the pit, but it was too late. He fell down into blackness, then plunged feet-first into a film of icy water that swiftly closed over his head.

With a shuddering gasp, Panaka broke the surface, trying desperately to stay afloat as his sodden clothing threatened to drag him back under. Rocks and

chunks of debris continued to rain down from on high, punching the water around him with loud splashes. Next to him Panaka saw a huge rectangle list over and begin to sink; with a start, Panaka saw it was the opposite tributary tunnel's door, WASTE STORAGE, which had been completely torn from its hinges.

Panaka kicked off his boots and silently cursed whomever had designed the Royal Security Force uniform to include a knee-length fabric skirt and a heavy leather vest. Treading water as he shed his gloves, Panaka stared up at the rim of the pit high above him.

Veermok dangled over the edge, his legs kicking uselessly. One hand was gripping some purchase outside the pit; the other was holding Panaka's S-5. Obviously unwilling to drop the weapon, yet unable to pull himself up one-handed, the radical dangled in the air helplessly before finally letting go of the blaster and swinging his free arm up to secure a better handhold.

The pistol fell straight down. Panaka sloshed over, hoping to catch it, but it broke the surface with a ploop and sank out of sight. Panaka drew a deep breath and dove beneath the water, paddling furiously. The icy water induced a tightness in his chest. Visibility was zero, but through luck or providence Panaka brushed against the dropping blaster with his frozen fingers. Claspings it eagerly in both hands, he kicked for the surface.

Near the surface, Panaka shoved a floating obstacle out of his way. Then he gasped for air once more. Veermok no longer hung from the edge of the pit.

Panaka reached out for the floating object he'd just jostled, hoping to use it as a life preserver while he examined the S-5. The floater was two meters long, roughly cylindrical. He threw his arms over it and it dipped under the water in response. Panaka turned his head toward the object's closest end.

A vacant-eyed rictus grinned back at him.

It had once been a Gungan, before the body had swelled and rotted. The eyestalks were gone, leaving only black sockets peering out from a skull. Rubbery flesh stretched tight over the snout, peeling away from two rows of blackened, grimacing teeth. Two fanlike ears floated on the surface of the water, though with the skin eaten away the cartilaginous webbing looked like long-fingered hands pointing in opposite directions.

Splashing away from the body in disgust, Panaka bumped into something behind him. He twisted around and saw a second body, this one human. Its stomach bulged with gas and its mouth gaped open in a soundless scream. The bile rose in Panaka's throat as he realized he'd swallowed the same water the seeping corpses were bobbing in. As he spat out his saliva, he saw at least a half-dozen other floating forms.

Panaka groped on his belt for the durasteel grappling hook. Finding it, he fitted it to the barrel of his S-5. Kicking hard to keep from dipping underwater, he raised the pistol with both hands and aimed straight up, past the rim of the pit, up to the rock ceiling of the tunnel itself. Squeezing the trigger, he fired the liquid-cable shooter.

A thin line of spraymist unspooled from the blaster, trailing the grappling hook like a strand of choloropede silk. It hardened into unbreakable wire the instant it touched the air. The grappling hook hit the roof of the tunnel with a thunk, its sharp tines biting deeply into the stone. Panaka thumbed the retract control.

Motors within the device whined as they pulled the line back into the S-5's tiny reservoir. Panaka held tightly to the pistol stock with both hands. As the S-5 climbed the cable he was lifted clear, water running off his clothing in great runnels.

Panaka halted the ascension once he had cleared the hole in the floor, with a couple of meters left on the line. He needed to gain enough lateral momentum to reach the edge of the pit. He began swinging back and forth, causing the grappling hook to rock in the stone overhead. As Panaka finished a long backward arc he raised both feet, prepared to jump to safety at the end of the return arc. As he passed the midpoint of the swing the grappling hook popped loose.

Panaka fell, but inertia still carried him to the lip of the pit. He hit the edge hard, knocking the breath from his lungs, but succeeded in wrapping one arm around a hairy root before he slid backward. Panaka pulled himself up to secure ground. Panting with fatigue, he retracted the remainder of the liquid cable and the dangling grappling hook.

Panaka stood and ran back toward the main tunnel, back to where the sando aqua monster had dug through from the outside world. His uniform felt like a suit

of cold, slapping armor as it leaked water onto his bare feet. As Panaka got closer to the site of the breach, the gray darkness of the underground passages began to give way to the pure indigo of Naboo's night sky.

The monster suddenly howled and slapped its snakelike bulk against the surface above. The tunnel vibrated like a struck drum-head. Panaka stumbled, off-balance, and drove his left heel into the point of a low stalagmite. Loose stone showered from the ceiling. From out in the main tunnel Panaka heard a cry of surprise. Favoring his right leg in a grotesque limp, Panaka lurched out into the opening, blaster pistol at the ready.

The main tunnel was utter devastation, as if it had been shattered by a pressure bomb. Panaka still couldn't believe he'd been standing at ground zero. Several tons of stone, most of it crumbled into shaak-sized boulders, littered the floor of what had once been a tunnel, though now that a chunk of the roof was missing Panaka supposed it was more like a trench. Straight up, through the hole above, he could see the constellation Beautitù winking from behind a shivering, heaving mass that was likely some part of the monster's shoulder.

The monster's claw had scooped away a mountain of broken stone, leaving two rocky heaps on opposite sides to mark its passing. One pile completely blocked the route Panaka and his captor had traversed at the start of their exploration. The other pile clogged the tunnel ahead where the amok laser turret had once stood guard. From the other side of this jumbled roadblock came muffled grunts and curses.

Throwing himself on the stone barrier, Panaka clambered up and peered over the top. Below him, Veermok had just freed himself from an avalanche of plate-sized flecks.

"Hold!" Panaka shouted. Veermok looked up, startled, and started running. He no longer had his disruptor. Panaka threw himself over the summit and slid down to the pebbly floor. He winced as he landed on his punctured heel. "Veermok! I'm telling you, hold!"

The other man didn't stop. Panaka aimed through the S-5's primary sight at Veermok's right knee and pulled the trigger.

The S-5 gave a nasty pop and released a drizzle of sparks like a cheap party favor. Panaka hissed as he realized that the dip in the icy water had gutted the blaster's electronics.

Veermok looked back. His voice was loud and mocking. "Problems, lieutenant? I'm sorry to see that." The intact tunnel ahead of him was spottily lit by the remaining illuminators. Past that, an upsloping turn led to the highest-numbered doors - - and to freedom. "You're obviously in no shape to run me down, so I'm afraid this is where we part ways. I hope we meet again under better circumstances." Veermok gave a flippant salute. "See you soon." He broke into an easy run.

Panaka made a minute adjustment to his S-5, aimed again, and fired.

The liquid cable shot forth like a streak of white light. The teeth of the durasteel grappling hook bit through Veermok's tunic and into the thick muscle below his right shoulderblade. He tripped and fell forward with a grunt.

Panaka braced his good foot against a sturdy chunk of rock and hit the S- 5's retract control.

The line pulled taut, flipping Veermok on his back. Slowly but inevitably it withdrew into the firing chamber. Veermok flailed like a hooked fish as he was dragged backward across the floor, but the cable towed the weight with mechanical efficiency.

When the cable had almost retracted, Panaka placed his foot on the other man's chest. "Sooner than you think."

Panaka flipped Veermok over on his stomach. Pulling the grappling hook free, Panaka pinned the man's arms with one hand while reaching for the Security Force wrist binders on his belt with the other.

In a last, desperate move, Veermok threw his head and shoulders up in a convulsive arch like a prisoner undergoing electrocution. The back of his head impacted squarely with Panaka's bandaged nose. Panaka grunted in pain and his hands went reflexively to his face. Taking advantage of the half-second distraction, Veermok wriggled forward and was on his feet before Panaka could stop him. He took off down the tunnel at top speed.



"Veermok! Don't do this!" Panaka aimed his S-5, grappling hook ready to fire.

The tunnel suddenly lit up like a pulsar, stinging Panaka's eyes. The accompanying CRACK was chased by rumbling echoes up and down the corridor walls. Veermok stood frozen in place, a smoking black hole in his back. Panaka stared dumbly down at his S-5, knowing he couldn't possibly have fired.

Veermok didn't crumple but instead fell straight backward like a chopped tree. His body hit the ground with a shallow splash, revealing another figure in the tunnel beyond.

Sate Pestage strode forward, blaster in hand.

Panaka maneuvered to the stricken man's side. The blaster shot had gone straight through the chest as if bored with a drill. It had not fully cauterized. The blood was red and thick, oozing slowly from the wound's shredded edges.

"Help me!" Panaka demanded of Pestage, cleaning flecks of ash away from the injury. "It's venous bleeding, not arterial. He still has a chance." Pestage walked closer but did not move to help.

Panaka glared up at him. "Why did you shoot? I had him!"

Pestage looked back coldly. For the first time, Panaka noticed the large lockbox he carried under his arm. "You needed help, lieutenant. We got your call." He nodded at the prone body. "And you got your man."

Panaka located where the vein met the bone and placed two fingers against the blood vessel, pinching off the principal hemorrhage. The heart was still pumping but Veermok wasn't breathing.

"Get back to the surface," Panaka snapped. "Comlink Theed. And bring me a medkit." Bending down, he placed his mouth over Veermok's and filled his quiet lungs with air.

Pestage remained where he was. "Too late for that."

The wet throbbing against Panaka's fingers suddenly ceased as if someone inside had thrown a tiny switch. With the sound of a punctured air tank, the breath escaped through Veermok's slack lips as his lungs collapsed. Panaka saw

Veermok's eyes unfocus as if he were looking through the tunnel ceiling at the heavens beyond, and then he was gone.

\* \* \*

The moon Ohma-D'un stood high in the sky, casting her pale brown light on the sea's rippling skin and the churning breakers below. Panaka stood on a rocky cliff overlooking the ocean. Behind him, on the road to Port Landien, clustered a half-dozen Royal Security Force speeders, their flashing signals spotlighting his own wrecked speeder strapped to the bed of a recovery floatcar. On the grass, Sergeant Bialy and the other officers were undergoing debriefing.

Panaka set his jaw as he prepared to answer Captain Magneta. "I'm not convinced, Captain. The evidence warrants further investigation. What Pestage did was illegal and indicative of a cover-up, diplomatic immunity or no."

"I'm the head of the Royal Security Forces, lieutenant," Magneta answered dryly. She wore a look of weary resignation. "I shouldn't have to convince you of anything." Magneta glanced back over her shoulder toward the distant tumor of rock that sheltered the monster's cove.

"But the bodies. Human and Gungan." Panaka massaged the damp fabric of his uniform to rub some warmth into his shoulders. "Eight bodies, possibly more."

"Regurgitated by the monster. Perhaps it couldn't stomach its final meal. "

Panaka suppressed a sigh. "I don't think so."

"It's happened before, with opees. You know that. You have bodies and you have a sea monster. A connection is not a coincidence."

"I realize that," Panaka admitted. "But those bodies were rotted, not digested."

Magneta looked at him sharply. "Killed by a pirate. Stashed under-ground so no one would find them."

Panaka crossed his arms. "There's something down there. A complex. The revolutionary claimed it was built by King Veruna, but I suspect it's offworld in origin. Pestage removed a box of evidence from the scene. He killed a witness

who might have known the truth. Those bodies-more of the same. The revolutionary spoke of 'missing friends' We should run forensics right away."

Captain Magneta's eyes flickered with obvious distraction, but Panaka plowed on. "If you're right, and it is a pirate, then Pestage is a knowing participant. He could be protecting his financial stake in an illegal Naboo operation."

"What are you suggesting, Lieutenant?"

"I'd like to place Sate Pestage under arrest."

Magneta nodded. "I'll take it under advisement." Her tone was quiet but dismissive.

"And I'd like to inform Veruna and Senator Palpatine," Panaka continued, narrowing his eyes. "This Coruscanti assassin is not a person they want to associate with."

"Enough. That will be my responsibility, not yours."

Panaka gave a clenched-jaw scowl.

Magneta looked absently out toward Ohma-D'un. Panaka followed her gaze, but his eyes caught upon something in the sky directly behind her. The moon's light glinted unnaturally against a faraway speck of metal above the tidal basin. Panaka knew it could only be an N-1 starfighter.

"You worry too much, Lieutenant," Magneta reassured, placing one hand on her throat.

Two needles of red issued from the distant starfighter. A bloom of orange fire burgeoned up behind the rock wall and spilled angrily over the side, as if reaching hungrily for the distant observers.

"It's all being taken care of."

### **The Syrox Redemption**

There's an inmate like me in every prison across the galaxy, I suppose—I'm the one who can get it for you. Glitterstim, juri juice, or maybe just a flimsiplast from the Core Worlds, if you're partial to that. Since my arrival here, I've smuggled in everything from shimmersilk slippers to spiced mynock wing for a Cyblocian assassin from the Meridian sector, who wanted to celebrate his birthday in style. With the exception of weapons and hard drugs, I can get my hands on just about any kind of contraband you might want. So when a new con named Waleed Nagma came up to me in the mess hall and asked if I could find him a bulb of Anzati snot garlic, I told him it would be no problem. And it wasn't.

"You're Zero, aren't you?"

I glanced up from my tray, taking my time, and favored him with an easy smile.

"Depends," I said. "Who's asking?"

He examined my outstretched hand for a moment before reaching out to give it a quick, uneasy shake. His eightfingered grip was cold and clammy. Like most new arrivals on the Hive, he was trying his hardest to come off tough, cool and imposing all at once, and it wasn't going well.

I could already see droplets of sweat around his hairline and upper lip, and his eyes twitched too fast, showing too much white around the edges.

"I heard you can get certain things," he said.

"Well." I blinked at him, still smiling, the picture of serene innocence. "I'm not sure where you might have heard such a rumor. I'm just another happy face here at the Hive."

"One of the guards told me about you," Nagma said.

"I need to place an order." He was so jumpy that he could barely stand still, and I guess I should've recognized trouble right away, but something about him had already intrigued me. "I can pay whatever it costs."

"Take it easy,"

I said, nodding at the empty place across the table. "Just have yourself a seat. We've got nothing but time."

After another hesitant beat, Nagma bent down and folded his lanky torso into the bench opposite mine. There was a lot of him to fold. At full height he stood almost two meters tall, gangling and narrow-shouldered and so skinny that the orange prison-issue uniform hung off his frame like the flag of some defeated principality. The pale dome of his elongated bald head was threaded with fine blue veins, and when he leaned across to whisper in my ear, I could smell the fear coming off of his skin in waves—at least I thought it was fear.

Looking back, I had no idea how sick he was.

"How does this sort of thing usually work?" he asked, rummaging down into his uniform. "Do I pay you first, or—"

"Relax, friend." I locked my eyes onto his. "We hardly know each other. Tell me your story. Where you're from. That sort of thing."

He squinted at me. "What's that got to do with anything?"

"I like to be properly introduced to anybody that I do business with," I said. "It insures that I'm dealing only with clients of the highest moral fiber."

"The highest...?" He glanced at me for a second, bewildered, then let out a snort. The joke was that every convict here in Cog Hive Seven, all five hundred twenty-two of us, represented the scum of the galaxy—murderers, mercenaries and psychopaths of every stripe and species, walking genetic disasters that wouldn't hesitate to slash your throat for half a credit, or no reason at all. Our one unifying trait was that no one would miss us. Which was why our esteemed warden, Sadiki Blirr, could run the Hive like she did, pitting us against one another in daily gladiatorial matches that had already become one of the galaxy's most lucrative gambling operations.

It didn't help that every inmate had a microscopic electrostatic charge injected directly into their heart upon arrival. A tiny explosive which could be triggered by any of the guards at any moment, for any reason. Walking around with an undetonated bomb in your chest had a peculiar effect on your general outlook—gives life here a certain transitory quality, you might say.

Nagma didn't seem to care about that now, and it didn't look like he was one for idle small talk. So I gave up trying to make conversation and sighed. "What are you looking for?" I asked.

"You know what Anzati snot garlic is?" he asked.

"What, you mean the cooking ingredient?" I frowned.

"I think I had it in shaak pot roast once. Why?"

"I need an entire bulb of it. As soon as possible." He laced his fingers together and cracked his knuckles, a nervous habit. "How long will it take to smuggle in?"

"If you don't mind my asking," I said, "what's the big emergency? Are the Bone Kings planning a banquet I'm not aware of?"

"It's this place," Nagma said. "You know that as well as I do, Zero. Everything's an emergency."

I didn't reply, but I understood what he meant. We were all well aware that the Hive's algorithm could select any of us at any time. When the prison walls began to pivot and twist and reassemble themselves around us, one cell would be paired with another, the occupants forced into a match where there could only be one survivor. In short, you never knew when your number was up.

"What do you need it for?" I asked.

"That's personal," Nagma said, but when he looked back up at me, I could see that his whole body was trembling, the sweat-stains already soaking through his uniform, forming darkened half-moons beneath his arms.

Nerves, I thought.

I was wrong.

\* \* \*

Nagma's snot garlic arrived a week later, smuggled in alongside a shipment of replacement droid components and medical supplies. By the time he came to pick it up, I realized that whatever was ailing him had gotten significantly worse.

Since the last time we'd spoken, his eyes had sunken into his head, giving his entire face a gaunt and haunted look, like a skull with the thinnest veneer of skin stretched across it.

He somehow seemed to have become even more skeletal, except for his belly, which bulged grotesquely outward from his uniform. He held it when he sat down, clutching it and wincing in pain as if he were in the throes of some terrible misbegotten pregnancy.

"You all right?" I asked.

He shook his head, waving the question away. His voice was thin, reedy with pain. "Did you get it?"

"Yes, and I'm happy to be rid of it," I said, reaching down into the hidden pocket I'd stitched inside my pantleg, and passing the bulb of snot garlic under the table. "This stuff reeks worse than a wet tauntaun."

"Here." Grabbing the garlic, he thrust a wad of crumpled credits notes into my palm, already rising up to leave. He didn't make it far. Three meters away, there was a sharp scream of pain, and we both looked up as one of the other cons—a sociopathic Rodian named Skagway—went flying across the next table over, blood geysering from the hole in his throat, splashing down to soak the front of his uniform. The moment that he hit the floor, Bone Kings, three of them, leapt on top of him, and I saw Nagma's expression sicken.

"What are they doing?" he asked.

"Deboning," I said, and reached for his arm. "Best not to watch." The one in charge was a mass murderer named Vas Nailhead, known especially for making weapons from the sharpened femurs and ribs of his kills.

For an instant Nagma stood paralyzed, unable to look away. After a second, Vas straightened up, his hands slathered with fresh blood. "What are you looking at, maggot?" Before Nagma could answer, Nailhead's hand shot out and grabbed him, yanking him forward so fast that his long skinny legs tangled underneath him. I saw Nagma's jaw drop open, hopeless, eyes goggling in panic.

"Easy, Vas." I held up one hand. "He's nothing to you." Nailhead glared at me and his lips wrinkled back. "Zero? You're standing up for this puke?"

"He's a customer," I said with a shrug. "I have to protect my income stream, don't I?"

We locked eyes for a second, and I lifted my right foot off the ground. My prison-issue boots were lined with plexisteel, and Nailhead knew what it would do if I decided to put one through his face.

He let out a snarl and released his grip and shoved Nagma back to his spot at the table. For a moment neither of us spoke. After what felt like a very long time, Nagma gazed up at me. "You stood up for me."

"It's nothing," I said. "Forget it."

He shook his head.

"I won't."

I sighed.

"Listen. Everything here is a test. It's just a matter of choosing your moment, and not hesitating when it comes."

Nagma let out a low, slow breath, and his bony shoulders trembled. The cloyingly sweet smell that I'd initially attributed to fear had become irrefutably stronger, and I realized now what it was—some form of fever, an illness that was only getting worse. In his sickened state, the attack seemed to have drained whatever strength he'd had, leaving him visibly depleted.

"You asked for my story." Something passed over his face, a grim tightness at the corners of the lips that could've been a smile—except the emotional component had been stripped away from it, leaving a kind of unplugged hopelessness.

"I'm from Monsolar. Little backwater dirt-clod tucked into the Alzoc system."

"Never heard of it."



"You're not missing much." He shook his head. "It's a pit. Heavy canopy, primitive tribes, most of them at war with each other... not many get out."

"You did."

He gave me a wry look. "Only to end up here," he said. "It's my own fault. I got caught with a stolen load of thermal detonators in a spaceport on Urdur. That's an automatic life sentence in any system."

"Tough luck," I said.

Nagma shrugged.

"The gangster who hired me said he could help me. I was desperate. I guess I still am."

I looked at him again, saw the sweat pouring down his emaciated face, the bulging stomach. "You're sick," I said.

"It's worse than that," he said. "It's the Worm."

"The what?"

He stared down at his trembling hands for a moment, as if the rest of the story might magically materialize in front of him, preventing him from having to tell it out loud. When it didn't, he drew a deep breath and pressed on. "Ever hear of the Syrox? The Wolf Worm of Monsolar?"

"Can't say that I have."

"It's an alpha species, native to my home planet." He let the breath out slowly. "An ectomorphic life-form, evolved in some way but not in others—a highly efficient, brainless predator. Feeds on blood. Imagine a blind river parasite half the size of this mess hall, with a mouth ringed in rows of teeth, and you'll start to get the idea."

I said nothing, just waited for him to continue.

"Back home," Nagma said, "most of the local tribes either worshiped it, feared it, or both. Over the generations, we built our culture around it, our stories and

myths and rites of passage." He gave me a queasy smile, and glanced down at the swollen bulge of his belly. "Every season the Syrox lays its eggs in the streams of the river. They start out small—microscopic. That's why we never drink unfiltered water on Monsolar. But say a kid gets lost in the jungle... and gets thirsty enough..."

I stared at him, seeing how it could have happened. Nagma nodded again and gave me that terrible, meaningless smile.

"Incubation time is slow. It can remain in the gut of the host for years, feeding and growing stronger." He looked down at his swollen stomach, and a terrible hopelessness flashed over his face. "But eventually it always finds its way out."

"And the gangster who hired you to transport those detonators—"

Nagma nodded again. "He said he could get it removed for me, that he could set me up with tricky surgery in a clinic back in the Core Worlds. But the authorities caught up with me first. Not that it matters now." He patted his stomach tenderly. "It's getting larger each day. I can feel it getting bigger, pushing my organs aside. Sometimes at night..." He swallowed hard. "I can feel it moving around inside me. And I have to get it out."

He took the bulb of garlic out of his pocket and placed it on the table, and for a moment we both looked at it. "So what's with the garlic?"

"Back on Monsolar, we had an old folk remedy for those who've been infected. Go to sleep with a bulb of snot garlic on your pillow. They say the Syrox is attracted to the smell. It comes crawling out on its own."

"Respectfully..." I stood up, reached across the table and tapped my finger over his chest. "You've got a bomb implanted in your heart. And at any given moment you could be matched against another inmate who will in all likelihood kill you." I waved my hand, gesturing to the inmates lined up at the mess hall tables. "Any one of us could be dead tomorrow. Why do you care so much about getting this parasite out of your system?"

Nagma gazed back at me, and for just a second I thought I saw a flash of the young tribesman that he'd once been, steadfast and unafraid with his whole future ahead of him. Before the Worm had gotten into him. Before he'd been

brought here. When he spoke again his voice was low and calm, but there was deep steel in it.

"My tribe is founded in the traditions of justice and honor," he said. "I can accept my sentence, because I chose to smuggle those detonators. It was my mistake, and I'll pay for it—with my life, if I have to." His eyes narrowed, growing cold. "But I want to go my way, Zero. Clean." He grimaced. "Without this godforsaken thing crawling around inside me."

He opened his mouth to say something else, and the clarion bell went off. In the Hive, that meant only one thing. The matching was about to begin. When the alarm sounded, you had five minutes till lockdown, and I knew what Nagma was thinking—what would happen if the algorithm, in its infinite wisdom, selected him, and when the countless moving parts of Cog Hive Seven finished their reconfiguration, the wall of his cell opened up to expose the inmate that would almost certainly be the death of him.

When I looked up again, he was gone.

\* \* \*

Waleed Nagma wasn't matched to fight that day, or the day after that, or the weeks to come. Every so often, I saw him lingering around the mess hall or the central pavilion where the halls of the Hive came together like spokes in a great wheel, where the cons milled around listlessly throughout the day, serving out their sentences and waiting to get matched. He never approached me or tried to make contact, but I could tell from looking at him that the thing he'd told me about—the Syrox, the thing he called the Wolf Worm—was still incubating inside him. His belly looked enormous, as if it were about to burst.

Then one day I was heading back to my cell for the night when a guard named Voystock came up behind me and tapped me on the shoulder.

"Zero?"

I stopped and looked around, and he waved me forward, back down the way I'd come. "Got a message for you. This way."

"Where are we going?"

He didn't answer, and I didn't really expect him to. We weren't heading for any of the cell blocks, but lower, following a narrow stairway to the abandoned manufacturing area that the cons called Nightside. Rounding a corner, Voystock swung open the broken hatchway and nodded me into the flat, darkened space beyond it. After a moment of standing there, letting my eyes adjust, I sensed something curled in the corner, fifteen meters away, moving in the shadows.

"Zero," a voice croaked.

The voice froze me. It was a raspy, almost incoherent whisper, so heavy with pain that I almost couldn't recognize it. "Nagma?"

"Don't come any closer," the voice said, and there was something clotted about the words, as if they were forcing their way through a thick obstruction. "It's coming up now. It's almost—"

The words broke off. I tried to step back, but my feet felt nailed to the spot. When the thing in the corner shifted slightly into a rectangle of light from the hatchway, I saw what I hadn't been able to make out before—or as much of it as I could stand to see, anyway. Enough to last me for the rest of my life.

Waleed Nagma was sprawled on his side, curled into a desperate, fetal clutch, with his cheek pressed against the durasteel floor. He was convulsing wildly. His eyes were pinched shut, but his mouth was stretched open so wide that I thought his jaw had dislocated.

Something was coming out of his mouth.

At first I thought it was his tongue. Except it was white. And huge. Ropey. And then I saw it plainly, slithering into view, slow and pale and thick and I knew what it was.

The Worm.

Its slimy, pale length was emerging from between Nagma's lips with a hideous laziness, slithering forward as its broad flat head quested after the withered bulb of snot garlic he'd placed in front of it.

I couldn't breathe. Could only watch in something that wasn't just revulsion, but went beyond that.

As the Worm came.

And came. And just kept on coming.

At the sight of it—the sheer repulsive length of the thing, several meters long at least—I heard myself curse aloud.

I felt my own stomach give an uneasy lurch, and heard Nagma scream.

By now the worm had pulled itself completely out, whipped its tail free, then reared back, twisting its blind head in my direction, as if only now realizing that I was here. For an instant, time seemed to freeze. As the Syrox faced me, the entire front of its head peeled back to reveal a perfectly round mouth, perhaps half a meter across, lined with rows of inward facing teeth. It lunged.

"Kill it!" Nagma shrieked. "Kill it, Zero!"

He said something else, but I didn't hear it. Springing forward, I lifted my foot, encased in the heavy prison-issue boot, and brought my heel down as hard as I could on the worm's head. There was a horrible scrunching squelch as whatever was inside of it collapsed and burst open. And I watched as its narrow hooked teeth scattered sideways in a skittering profusion across the floor.

The body of the thing fell still, deflated.

For what felt like a long time, neither of us moved. Then Nagma reached up and wiped his mouth and spat, and with great effort, started to stand up. I reached out and helped him rise to his full height. He nodded his thanks.

"I suppose... this means..." He hitched in a breath and glanced over where the bulb of snot garlic still sat, "...I owe you again...?"

"Forget it." I wiped off the bottom of my boot, scraping it against a pile of discarded droid parts that had been left in the corner. "Just so I don't ever have to look at that thing again."

Nagma stood there in the corner for a long time without speaking. Looking at the way he stood now, with his back and shoulders held straight, I thought I

understood something about him now, the connection that I hadn't grasped earlier.

And I saw why he'd asked for the snot garlic, and why it was so important to him. Why, in the midst of this living hell, it did matter.

True, we inmates of Cog Hive Seven walked around with bombs implanted in our chests, and we couldn't know when the algorithm might send us into about...but there were still some things that we had control over. A part of us that the guards and the warden and the fights couldn't touch. And I guess I knew what the word for that was. It was a strange word to use in a place like this, but it fit.

Freedom.

"Zero?"

I looked at him. "Yeah? "

"I can't help but wonder..." He stared at me, hollow-eyed and haunted. "What if I didn't get it all? What if part of it broke off inside of me? What if...?"

He didn't finish, and in the end, he just went back to his cell, alone.

All of this was a long time ago, several years at least, although time has a funny way of passing differently here. Sometimes when I'm lying in my cell waiting to go to sleep, I wonder why Nagma sent for me that night. It might've been because I was the only one he'd told about the Worm, or maybe I was the closest he had to a friend in this place... or he'd just wanted to make sure that someone was around to finish the thing off. Someone who wouldn't hesitate in the moment when it mattered the most.

Two weeks after those hideous few minutes in Nightside, his number was matched by the algorithm, and he went up against another inmate. It wasn't much of a fight. Nagma's opponent killed him within just a few minutes. I never had another opportunity to find out what happened with the Worm, whether there was any left inside.

But at night sometimes, when the hours draw out and I can't find sleep, I do wonder.

I think about the holovid of Nagma's Match—I've watched it several times—and what happened at the very end, when his slack face hit the floor. I think about the thing that might not have been his tongue that came out from the corner of his slackened lips. The detail and resolution on the holovid isn't great, and no matter how many times I watch it, I can't quite be sure.

But it makes me think about that thing, the Worm that came all the way from Monsolar inside of his belly, and how it got here and discovered something that the rest of us only think about in the abstract, something that under the circumstances might not have been good for the rest of us at all.

And sometimes I think about the last comment that he made to me, before going back to his cell that night. Not a statement but a question, one that I couldn't answer—not that he seemed to expect one.

I just wonder... What if I didn't get it all? What if part of it broke off inside of me?

And that's when I think about the Worm inside the dark recesses of the Hive, the ductwork and the walls, moving in silence and growing fat on the blood of the cons that die in the fights.

What it might find here, in the dark.

And I think about that word again.

That terrible word.

Freedom.

**34bby**

### **Darth Maul: Dark Disciple**

The winds throw a stinging sand across his bare skin, while his black robe snaps around the metallic hilt of the saberstaff hanging dormant at his waist. Maul is coiled, lethal, the force of his will pent-up with the violent need for his muscles to spring. Closing his eyes, he finds and grasps an agonizing memory.

Torture. His memories are of pain, of electric fire arcing from the contorted fingers of his master, coursing through his synapses as he cried out for relief. There would be no relief, though, short of marshaling his hate. He knows that

hate unlocks the Dark Side. Only once consumed with hate would a master end the agony.

Anger builds around him now in waves. He allows it to increase, fed by those memories of pain, and of his master's mocking laughter. A terrible rage grows, swelling within him, and a roaring fills his ears. His eyes snap open, glowing in horrible hues of red, orange, and yellow.

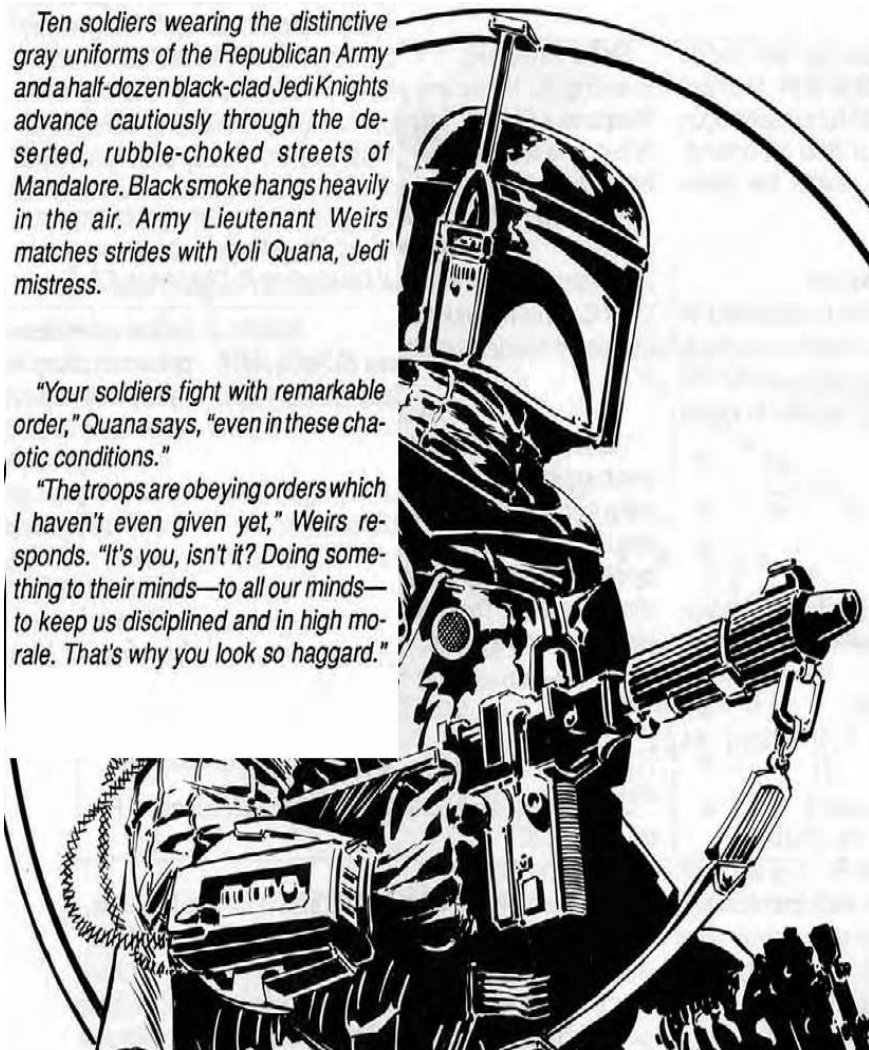
His anger is pure hatred. And that hatred explodes.

### **Battle For Mandalore**

*Ten soldiers wearing the distinctive gray uniforms of the Republican Army and a half-dozen black-clad Jedi Knights advance cautiously through the deserted, rubble-choked streets of Mandalore. Black smoke hangs heavily in the air. Army Lieutenant Weirs matches strides with Voli Quana, Jedi mistress.*

*"Your soldiers fight with remarkable order," Quana says, "even in these chaotic conditions."*

*"The troops are obeying orders which I haven't even given yet," Weirs responds. "It's you, isn't it? Doing something to their minds—to all our minds—to keep us disciplined and in high morale. That's why you look so haggard."*



*"The governor is still in the city," Quana says, "but he is preparing to escape in a private spacecraft. He must be tried for crimes against the Republic. I am telepathically relaying all your orders so we may reach him in time. And do not concern yourself with my health, for my ally is the Force...." Quana stops, covering her eyes with a hand.*

*"What's wrong?" Weirs asks.*

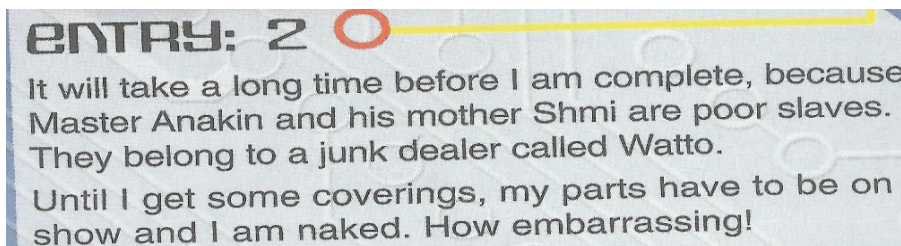
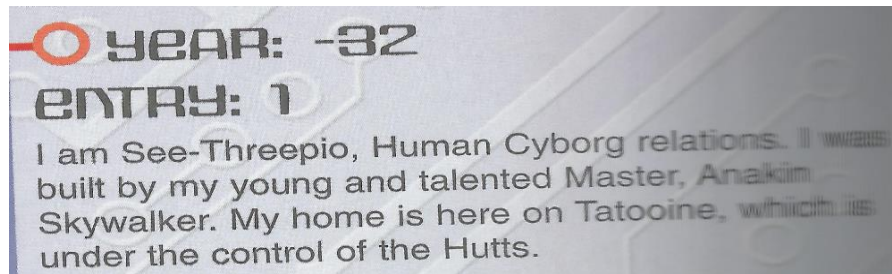
*"Halt your troops, lieutenant. I sense...."*

*Suddenly a loud blast and the flash of a bright blue beam. An ambush! Weirs' chest explodes, and his body spins into an alley. Quana's amber-bladed lightsaber is in her hand, ignited, in time to deflect a second blast aimed at her. In the next second, dozens of blue and red blaster bolts intersect the smoky streets, ionizing the air and sending chunks of formex flying with each near miss. The final battle for Mandalore begins!*



33bby

### Exceptrs From See-Threepio's Journal



### Prelude To Rebellion #0











MASTER, A JEDI  
OFTEN CONFRONTS  
A SINGLE  
OPPONENT--



--BUT HOW DOES  
A JEDI CONFRONT A  
PLANETARY UPRISING?

A TIDE CANNOT BE CHANGED,  
BUT AT THE CENTER OF EVERY  
PROBLEM, A SINGLE FIGURE  
STANDS.



COWARDLY IS HE  
WHEN FACED IN THE  
LIGHT

NO, SOMETHING ELSE  
BEHIND YOU, YOU HAVE.



BUT I AM BRAVE AND  
STRONG, AND I HAVE  
THE POWER  
OF THE  
LIGHT  
SIDE  
BEHIND  
ME.











IT ISN'T FAIR THAT CERIA  
BE SUBJECTED TO SUCH  
PRESSURES FROM THE  
REPUBLIC.

MASTER YODA, THAT SCENARIO  
WASN'T FAIR. YOU EXCEEDED  
THE DROIDS' MOVEMENT  
PARAMETERS AND MADE THEM  
ATTACK ME SIMULTANEOUSLY!

FAIR? CARE  
YOUR ENEMIES  
ABOUT FAIR?

IT'S COWARDLY  
FOR BRON TO ROUSE OUR  
OWN PEOPLE AGAINST THE  
SANCTITY OF CERIA

I FEEL THAT A  
CONFRONTATION  
IS INEVITABLE

BUT WHEN IT COMES,  
I WILL BE READY.

CIVILIZED. THESE TIMES  
ARE PEACEFUL. BUT SOMEDAY,  
UNFAIRNESS YOU MUST FACE!  
UNFAIRNESS AND COWARDICE!  
PREPARE YOURSELF FOR IT  
YOU MUST, KI-ADI-MUNDI!

**Darth Maul: Sabotuer**

Nearly every world in the Videnda sector had something to recommend it: warm saline seas, verdant forests, arable grasslands that stretched to distant horizons. The outlying world known as Dorvalla had a touch of all of those. But what it had in abundance was lommite ore, an essential component in the production of transparisteel, a strong, transparent metal used galaxywide for canopies and viewports in both starships and ground-based structures. Dorvalla was so rich in lommite that one-quarter of the planet's scant population was involved in the industry, employed either by Lommite Limited or its contentious rival, InterGalactic Ore.

The chalky ore was mined in Dorvalla's tropical equatorial regions. Lommite Limited's base of operations was in Dorvalla's western hemisphere, in a broad rift valley blanketed with thick forest and defined by steep escarpments. There, where ancient seas had once held sway, shifts in the planetary mantle had thrust huge, sheer-faced tors from the land. Crowned by rampant vegetation, by trees and ferns primeval in scale, the high, rocky mountains rose like islands, blinding white in the sunlight, the birthplace of slender waterfalls that plunged thousands of meters to the valley floor.

But what was once a wilderness was now just another extractive enterprise. Huge demolition droids had carved wide roads to the bases of most of the larger cliffs, and two circular launch zones, large enough to accommodate dozens of ungainly space shuttles, had been hollowed from the forest. The tors themselves were gouged and honeycombed with mines, and deep craters filled with polluted runoff water reflected the sun and sky like fogged mirrors.

The ceaseless work of the droids was abetted by an all but indentured labor force of humans and aliens, to whom the mined ore served as a great equalizer. No matter the natural color of a miner's skin, hair, feathers, or scales, everyone was rendered white as the galactic dawn. All agreed that sentient beings deserved more from life, but Lommite Limited wasn't prosperous enough to convert fully to droid labor, and Dorvalla wasn't a world of boundless opportunities for employment.

Still, that didn't stop some from dreaming.

Patch Bruit, Lommite Limited's chief of field operations, human beneath a routine dusting of ore, had long dreamed of starting over, of relocating to Coruscant or one of the other Core worlds and making a new life for himself. But such a move was years away, and not likely to happen at all if he kept returning his meager wages to LL by overspending in the company-run stores and squandering what little remained on gambling and drink.

He had been with LL for almost twenty years, and in that time had managed to work his way out of the pits into a position of authority. But with that authority had come more responsibility than he had bargained for, and in the wake of several recent incidents of industrial sabotage his patience was nearly spent.

The boxy control station in which Bruit spent the better part of his workdays looked out on the forest of tors and the shuttle launch and landing zones. To the station's numerous video display screens came views of repulsorlift platforms elevating gangs of workers to the gaping mouths of the artificial caves that dimpled the precipitous faces of the mountains. Elsewhere, the platform lifting was accomplished with the help of strong-backed beasts, with massive curving necks and gentle eyes.

The technicians who worked alongside Bruit in the control station were fond of listening to recorded music, but the music could scarcely be heard over the unrelenting drone of enormous drilling machines, the low bellowing of the lift beasts, and the roar of departing shuttles.

The walls of the control station were made of transparisteel, thick as a finger, whose triple-glazed panels were supposed to keep out the ore dust but never did. Fine as clay, the resinous dust seeped through the smallest openings and filmed everything. As hard as he tried, Bruit could never get the stuff off him, not in water showers or sonic baths. He smelled it everywhere he went, he tasted it in the food served up in the company restaurants, and sometimes it infiltrated his dreams. So pervasive was the lommite dust that, from space, Dorvalla appeared to be girdled by a white band.

Fortunately, everyone within a hundred kilometers of Lommite Limited's operation was in the same predicament: miners, shopkeepers, the beings who tended the cantina bars. But what should have been just one big happy lommite family wasn't. The recurrent incidents of sabotage had fostered an atmosphere

of wariness and distrust, even among laborers who worked shoulder to shoulder in the pits.

"Group Two shuttles are loaded and ready for launch, Chief," one of the human technicians reported.

Bruit directed his gaze to the droid-guided, mechanized transports that were responsible for ferrying the lommite up the gravity well. In high orbit the payloads were transferred to LL's flotilla of barges, which conveyed the unrefined ore to manufacturing worlds along the Rimma Trade Route and occasionally to the distant Core.

"Sound the warning," Bruit said.

The technician flipped a series of switches on the console, and loudspeakers began to hoot. Miners and maintenance droids moved away from the launch zone. Bruit looked at the screens that displayed close-up views of the shuttles. He studied them carefully, searching for anything out of the ordinary.

"Launch zone is vacated," the same technician updated. "Shuttles are standing by for liftoff."

Bruit nodded. "Issue the go-to."

It was a routine that would be repeated a dozen times before Bruit's workday concluded, typically long past sunset.

The eight unpiloted craft rose from the ground on repulsorlift power, pirouetting and bringing their blunt noses around to the southwest. The air beneath them rippled with heat. When the shuttles were fifty meters above the ground, their sublight engines engaged, flaring blue, rocketing the ships high into the dust-filled sky.

The ground shook slightly, and Bruit could feel a reassuring rumble in his bones. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. For the next hour, he could relax somewhat. He had turned from the view of the launch zone when his bones and his ears alerted him to a shift in the roaring sound, a slight drop in volume that shouldn't have occurred.



Sudden apprehension tugged at him. His forehead and palms broke an icy sweat. He whirled and pressed his face to the south-facing transparisteel panel. High in the sky he could see two of the shuttles beginning to diverge from course, their vapor trails curving away from the straight-line ascent of the rest of the group.

"Fourteen and sixteen," the technician affirmed. "I'm trying to shut down the sublights and convert them back over to repulsorlift. No response. They're accelerating!"

Bruit kept his eyes glued to the sky. "Give me a heading."

"Back at us!"

Bruit ran his hand over his forehead. "Enable the self-destructs."

The technician's fingers flew across the console. "No response."

"Employ the emergency override."

"Still no response. The overrides have been disabled."

Bruit cursed loudly. "Vector update."

"They're aimed directly for the Castle."

Bruit glanced at the indicated tor. It was one of the largest of the mines, so named for the natural spires that graced its western and southern faces.

"Order an evacuation. Highest priority."

Sirens shrieked in the distance. Within moments, Bruit could see workers hurrying from the mine openings and leaping onto waiting hover platforms. Two fully occupied platforms were already beginning to descend.

"Tell those platform pilots to keep everyone aloft," Bruit barked. "No one'll be any safer on the ground than in the mines. And start moving those droids and lift beasts out of there!"

A colossal bipedal drilling machine appeared at the mouth of one of the mines, engaged its repulsorlift, and stepped off into thin air.

"Thirty seconds till impact," the technician said.

"Jettison the shuttles' guidance droids."

"Droids away!"

Bruit clenched his hands. The two rudderless shuttles were plummeting side by side, as if in a race to reach the Castle. The technicians had already managed to shut down fourteen's sublight, and sixteen's flared out while Bruit watched. But there was no stopping them now. They were in ballistic freefall.

In the control station, droids and beings alike were crouched behind the instrument consoles all except for Bruit, who refused to move, seemingly oblivious to the fact that concussion alone could turn the booth's transparisteel panels into a hail of deadly missiles.

The shuttles struck the Castle at almost the same instant, impacting it above the loftiest of the mines, perhaps fifty meters below the tor's jungled summit.

The Castle disappeared behind an explosive flare of blinding light. Then the sound of the collisions pealed across the landscape, reverberating and crackling, echoing thunderously from the twin escarpments. Immense chunks of rock flew from the face of the tor, and two of its elegant spires toppled. Dust spewed from the mine openings, as if the Castle had coughed itself empty of ore. The air filled with billowing clouds, white as snow. Almost immediately the ore began to precipitate, falling like volcanic ash and burying everything within one hundred meters of that side of the mountain.

Bruit still didn't budgenot until the roiling cloud reached the control station and the view became a whiteout.

Lommite Limited's headquarters complex nestled at the foot of the valley's western escarpment. But even there a half a centimeter of lommite dust covered the lush lawns and flower gardens LL's executive officer, Jurnel Arrant, had succeeded in coaxing from the acidic soil.

The soles of Bruit's boots made clear impressions in the dust as he approached Arrant's office, with its expansive views of the valley and far-off tors. Bruit tried to stomp, brush, and scuff as much dust as he could from his boots, but it was a hopeless task.

Jurnel Arrant was standing at the window, his back to the room, when Bruit was admitted.

"Some mess," Arrant said when he heard the door seal itself behind Bruit.

"You think this is bad, just wait'll it rains. It'll be soup out there."

Bruit thought the remark might lighten the moment, but Arrant's piqued expression when he turned from the view set him straight.

Lommite Limited's leader was a trim, handsome human, just shy of middle age. When he had first come to Dorvalla from his native Corellia, he had not been above rolling up his shirtsleeves and pitching in wherever needed. But as LL had begun to thrive under his stewardship, Arrant had become increasingly fastidious and removed, choosing to let Bruit handle day-to-day affairs. Arrant favored expensive tunics of dark colors, the shoulders invariably dusted with lommite, which he wore as a badge of honor. If his nonindigenous status had been held against him initially, few had anything disparaging to say about the man who had single-handedly transformed formerly provincial Lommite Limited into a corporation that now did business with a host of prominent worlds.

Arrant glanced at the white prints Bruit's boots had left on the carpet. Sighing with purpose, he motioned Bruit to a chair and settled himself behind an old hardwood desk.

"What am I going to do with you, Bruit?" he asked theatrically. "When you asked for enhanced surveillance equipment, I provided it for you. And when you asked for increased security personnel, I provided those, as well. Is there something else you need? Is there something I've neglected to give you?"

Bruit compressed his lips and shook his head.

"You don't have a family. You don't have a girlfriend that I know about. So maybe you just don't care about your job, is that it?"

"You know that isn't true," Bruit lied.

"Then why aren't you doing it?" Arrant put his elbows on the desk and leaned forward. "This is the third incident in as many weeks, Bruit. I don't understand how this keeps happening. Do you have any leads on the shuttle crashes?"

"We'll know more if the guidance droids can be located and analyzed," Bruit said. "Right now they're buried under about five meters of dust."

"Well, get on it. I want you to devote all your resources to rooting out the saboteurs responsible for this. Do you think you can do that, Bruit, or do I have to bring in specialists?"

"They won't be able to learn any more than I have," Bruit rejoined.

"InterGalactic Ore is becoming as desperate as LL is successful. Besides, it's not just a matter of industrial rivalry. A lot of the families that work for InterGal have vendettas with some of the families we employ. At least two of these recent incidents have been motivated by personal grudges."

"What are you suggesting, Bruit, that I terminate everyone and ship in ten thousand miners from Fondor? What's that going to do to production? More important, what's that going to do to my reputation on Dorvalla?"

Bruit shrugged. "I don't have any answers for you. Maybe it's time you brought this to the attention of the Galactic Senate."

Arrant stared at him. "Bring this to Coruscant? We're not in the midst of an interstellar conflict, Bruit. This is corporate warfare, and I've been in the trenches long enough to know that it's best to resolve these conflicts on your own. What's more, I don't want the senate involved. It will come down to a contest between Lommite Limited and InterGalactic, as to who can offer the most bribes to the most senators." He shook his head angrily. "That'll bankrupt us quicker than this continued sabotage."

Bruit had his mouth open to reply when a tone sounded from Arrant's intercom, and the voice of his protocol droid secretary issued from the annunciator.

"I'm sorry to disturb you, sir, but you have a priority holotransmission from a Neimoidian, Hath Monchar."

Arrant's fine brows beetled. "Monchar? I don't know the name. But go ahead, put him through."

From a holoprojector disk set into the floor at the center of the office rose the life-size holopresence of a red-orbed, pale-green Neimoidian draped in rich robes and wearing a black headpiece that aspired to be a crown.

"I greet you in the name of the Trade Federation, Jurnel Arrant," Hath Monchar began. "Viceroy Nute Gunray conveys his warmest regards, and wishes you to know that the Trade Federation was sorry to learn of your latest setback."

Arrant scowled. "How is it that whenever tragedy strikes, the first ones I hear from are the Neimoidians?"

"We are a compassionate species," Monchar said, his heavily accented Basic elongating the words.

"Compassionate and Neimoidian don't belong in the same sentence, Monchar. And just how did you come to hear of our 'setback,' as you call it? Or was it that the Trade Federation had a hand in the matter?"

The nictitating membranes of Monchar's red eyes began to spasm. "The Trade Federation would never do anything to impair relations with a potential partner."

"Partner?" Arrant laughed ruefully. "At least have the decency to speak the truth, Monchar. You want our trade routes. I don't know how much you had to pay the Galactic Senate to obtain a franchise to operate with impunity in the free trade zones, but you're not going to buy your way into the Videnda sector."

"But you could ship ten times as much lommite ore inside one of our freighters as you can in twenty of your largest barges."

"Granted. But at what price? Before long it would cost us more to ship with you than we could possibly earn back. You wouldn't be wearing those expensive robes, otherwise."

Monchar took a moment to reply. "We would much prefer that our partnership begins on solid footing. We would hate to see Lommite Limited become ensnared in a situation that allows it no recourse but to join us."

Arrant bristled and shot to his feet. "Is that a threat, Monchar? What do you intend to do, send your droids down here to invade us?"

Monchar made a motion of dismissal. "We are merchants, not conquerors."

"Then stop talking like a conqueror, or I'll report this to the Trade Commission on Coruscant."

"You're upset," Monchar said, nervously stroking his prominent muzzle. "Perhaps we should speak at some later date."

"Don't contact me, Monchar. I'll contact you."

Arrant deactivated the holoprojector and dropped back into his chair, forcing a long exhalation through pursed lips. "Scavengers," he said after a moment. "I'd sooner see LL go under than sell out to the Trade Federation."

Into a brief succeeding silence came a persistent plopping sound from outside the office's floor-to-ceiling viewpanes. "What now?" Arrant asked, swiveling his chair toward the sound.

"Rain," Bruit muttered.

Despite its rich deposits of lommite, or the recurrent attention it received from the Trade Federation, Dorvalla was to most observers an inconsequential speck in the sweep of star systems that made up the Galactic Republic. But among the few who had been monitoring the events on Dorvalla, none had followed them as keenly as Darth Sidious, the Dark Lord of the Sith.

"This rivalry between Lommite Limited and InterGalactic Ore intrigues me," Sidious was saying as he moved about the cavernous den that was both his sanctuary and repository. The hood of his cowl was raised over his lined face, and the hem of his robe trailed on the gleaming floor. His voice was a rasp, absent emotion but not without instances of intentional inflection.

"I see a way that we might exploit this entanglement to our own gain," he continued. "A push here, a shove there, and both mining companies will collapse. Thus, we will be able to deliver Dorvalla to the Trade Federationthe

ore, the trade routes, Dorvalla's vote in the senate and, in so doing, gain the further allegiance of Viceroy Gunray and his lackeys."

Sidious removed his hands from the ample sleeves of his robe. "Viceroy Gunray claims to be persuaded of the worth of serving us, but I want him fully in our grasp, so that there can be no doubt of his heeding my commands. With Dorvalla secured, he will likely be promoted to a permanent position on the Trade Federation Directorate. We can then further our larger plan."

Sidious cast his hooded gaze across the room to a deeply shadowed area in which Darth Maul sat silent as a statue, his tattooed face lowered, so that all Sidious could see was the crown of vestigial horns that sprouted from his hairless skull.

"Your thoughts betray you, my young apprentice," he remarked. "You are puzzled by my steadfast interest in the Neimoidians."

Darth Maul lifted his face, and what scant light there was seemed to recoil. Where his Master represented all that was concealed and mysterious in the Sith, Maul was the personification of all that was to be feared.

"From you, Master, I cannot hide what I feel. The Neimoidians are greedy and weak-willed. I find them unworthy."

"You left out duplicitous and sniveling," Sidious said.

"Most of all, Master."

Sidious came as close as he ever came to grinning.

"Less than admirable traits, I agree. But useful for our purposes." He approached Maul. "To realize our goal, we will be forced to deal with all classes of beings, each less noble than the last. But this is what we must do. I assure you that the Neimoidians will come to play an important role in our effort to bring new order to the galaxy."

Maul's yellow eyes held Sidious's perceptive gaze. "Master, how will you help Viceroy Gunray and the Trade Federation secure Dorvalla?"

Sidious came to a halt a few meters away. "You will be my hand in this, Darth Maul."

Instantly, Maul bowed his head once more. "What is your bidding, Master?"

Sidious put his hands on his hips. "Stand, Darth Maul, and face me." He gave his apprentice a moment to comply before continuing. "Thus far your apprenticeship has been impeccable. You have never wavered in your intent, and you have executed your tasks flawlessly. Your skill as a sword master is peerless."

"My Master, " Maul said. "I live to serve you."

Sidious fell briefly silent never a good sign. "There are certainties, Darth Maul," he said at last. "But there is also the unforeseen. The power of the dark side is limitless, but only to those who accept uncertainty. That means being able to concede to possibilities."

Darth Sidious raised his right hand, palm outward.

Before Maul could prevent it even if he had chosen to do so the long cylinder that was his double-bladed lightsaber flew from its hitch on his belt and went directly to his Master. But instead of grasping it, Sidious stopped the lightsaber in midflight, centimeters from his raised hand, and directed it to spin and rotate before him, leaving Maul to gaze at him in unabashed awe.

Sidious bade the lightsaber to ignite. From each end blazed a meter-long blade of rubicund fire, hypnotic in the intensity of its burning. The free-floating weapon pivoted left, then right, eliciting a thrumming sound that was as menacing as it was rousing.

"An exquisite weapon," Sidious said. "Tell me, my young apprentice, what were you thinking when you fashioned it? Why this and not a single blade, as the Jedi prefer?"

"The single blade has limitations, Master, in offense and defense. It made sense to me to be able to strike with both ends."

Sidious made a sound of approval. "You must bear that in mind when you go to Dorvalla, Darth Maul. But remember this: What is done in secret has great



power. A sword master knows that when he flourishes his blade, he reveals his intent. Be watchful. It is too soon to reveal ourselves."

"I understand, Master."

Sidious deactivated the lightsaber and sent it back to Maul, who received it as one might a cherished possession. Then Sidious approached Maul and handed him a data disk. "Study this as you travel. It contains the names and descriptions of the beings you will encounter, and other information you will find useful."

Sidious beckoned Maul to follow him to the far wall of their murky lair. As they approached, a great panel drew open, revealing a lofty view of the planetwide cityscape that was Coruscant.

"You will find Dorvalla to be a much different landscape than Coruscant, Darth Maul." Sidious turned slightly in Maul's direction, appraising him from beneath the cowl. "I suspect that you will savor the experience."

"And you, my Master, where will you be?"

"Here," Sidious said. "Awaiting your return, and the news that your mission was successful."

It had taken two days to locate and exhumate the guidance droids from the crashed shuttles, and it had rained the entire time. The soup in the shadow of the Castle was three meters thick. Bruit had insisted on overseeing the search-and-recovery operation. He wanted to be on hand when the droids were analyzed.

Few of Lommite Limited's employees had access to the launch zone, and fewer still had access to the mechanized shuttles themselves. Tampering of the sort that had brought down the crafts would have left characteristic signs of the computer slicer who had effected previous acts of terrorism and sabotage. Bruit's sources had already established that the slicer was an agent of InterGalactic Ore, but the saboteur's identity had yet to be ascertained.

The team Bruit had assigned to the retrieval was a mix of beings from the relatively nearby star systems of Clak'dor, Sullust, and Malastarethat was to say, Bith, Sullustans, and transplanted Gran. All were suited up in goggles, respirators, and large-format footwear that kept everyone from sinking too

deeply into the gelatinous mess the rain had made of the ore. All except Bruit, who was sporting thigh-high boots in an effort to stay clean.

"No doubt about it, Chief," one of the limpid-eyed Sullustans said, after running a series of tests on one of the R-series guidance droids. "Whoever sliced his way into this little guy is the same one who shut down the conveyors last month. I'll stake my wages on it."

"Don't bother," Bruit said. "You've only corroborated what all of us already knew." He gave his head an angry shake. "I want the launch zones shut down until further notice--limits to everyone. Then I want every member of the launch prep and maintenance crews brought in for questioning."

"What about the ore, Chief?" one of the Bith asked.

"We'll import temporary crews, even if we have to go to Fondor to stock the crews we need. Once we're up and running, we'll have to double the shuttle flights."

Knowing what doubling the flights would entail, everyone groaned.

"What's the boss going to say about this?" the Sullustan asked. Bruit glanced in the direction of headquarters. Arrant already knew that the guidance droids had been located, and was waiting in his office for Bruit's report.

"I'll tell you when I get back," Bruit said.

He set off for the landspeeder he had left at the control booth, but he hadn't gone ten meters when his left boot became hopelessly cemented in the mucky soup. He grabbed the thigh-high cuff of the boot, hoping he could simply pull it free, but he lost his balance and pitched to one side, sinking up to his right shoulder. He maintained that indecorous pose for some moments, while he daydreamed of what life might be like on Coruscant.

"You were right about things getting worse," Arrant said when Bruit entered the office, muddy and in his stocking feet.

"I was also right about InterGalactic. The guidance droids show exactly what we expected to find."

A grim expression marred Arrant's handsome face. "This has gone far enough," he said after a moment. "Bruit, you know that I'm a patient man, and basically a peaceful one. I've tolerated these acts of vandalism and sabotage, but I've reached my limit. The loss of those two shuttles . . . Look. Corellian Engineering just turned to InterGalactic for a shipment we couldn't provide no doubt, just as InterGalactic anticipated would happen."

"It won't happen again," Bruit interjected. "I've shut down the launch zones, and I'm bringing in replacement crews."

"You have one day," Arrant said.

Bruit gaped at him.

"Eriadu has placed major orders with us and InterGalactic," Arrant explained. "We're expected to deliver by the end of the week, which gives us just enough time to get the barges loaded and jumped to hyperspace. This is a make-or-break contract, Bruit, and Eriadu is going to award it to whichever one of us can deliver on time and without incident. LL needs to get there first, do you understand?"

Bruit nodded. "I'll have the shuttles up and running in one day."

"That's only the beginning," Arrant said carefully. "It's a sure bet you're not going to root out the saboteurs by then, so instead of that I want you to arrange for us to reply in kind to InterGalactic's actions." He waited for Bruit to absorb his intent. "I want to hit them hard, Bruit. But I don't want us to do the hitting directly."

Bruit considered it. "I suppose we could turn to one of the criminal organizations. Black Sun, maybe."

Arrant waved his hands in a gesture of dismissal. "That's your area of expertise. The less I know about it, the better. I just don't want us to be in a position where we can be blackmailed afterward."

"Then we're better off using freelancers."

"Do whatever you need to do and no matter what the cost."

Bruit took a breath. "I've a feeling that Dorvalla isn't going to be the same from this point on."

Dressed in a lightweight utility suit and a black overcloak, its hood raised against teeming rain, Darth Maul strode down the main street of the company town Lommite Limited had assembled in the midst of what had once been a trackless tropical forest. Beneath the cloak, he wore his double-bladed lightsaber hooked to his belt, within easy reach should he need it. Dorvalla's gravity was slightly less than what he was accustomed to, so he moved with an extra measure of grace.

A grid of permacrete streets, the town was a warren of prefabricated domes and rickety wooden structures, many of them lacking transparisteel in their windows. Music spilled from the entrances to cantinas and eateries, and folks of all description meandered tipsily down the raised walkways. The place had the feeling of frontier towns throughout the outlying star systems, with the routine mix of aliens, humanoids, and older-generation droids; sterility and contamination; repulsorlift vehicles operating alongside four-and six-legged beasts of burden.

The residents, all of whom either worked directly for Lommite Limited or were there to defraud those who did, projected the same mix of autonomy from the laws that regulated life on the Core worlds and enslavement to perpetual toil and poverty.

Unlike Coruscant, where beings hustled to and fro with determination, here reigned an atmosphere of purposelessness, of accidental life, as if the pitiful beings who had been born here, or who had arrived for whatever reason, had resigned themselves to the depths. Like the bottom feeders who dwelled in the lawless bowels of Coruscant, they seemed to be going through the motions of living, rather than grasping life and turning it to their own purposes.

The revelation fascinated Maul as much as it disheartened him. He decided that he needed to gaze beyond appearances.

The air was thick with heat and humidity, and the buzzing and chirping sounds of the surrounding forest played at the edge of his hearing. He could sense the interplay of life there, the fights and flights, and the ongoing struggle for survival. And the forest had imparted some of itself to the town. For here lived beings who were not above hunting and killing to obtain the sustenance they

required. A veneer of laws regulated such things, but beneath that veneer lurked a more base morality that allowed opponents to settle their matters without fear of intrusion by keepers of the peace, judicials, or even worse, the Jedi Knights.

Life was cheap.

Maul threw out his right hand and snatched a fist-sized insect in midflight. Dazed, the flitter lay in his palm, perhaps wondering on some primitive level just what make or manner of predator it had blundered into. The creature's six legs wriggled and its pair of antennae twitched. Its twin eyespots and carapaced body glowed with a faintly green bioluminescence.

Darth Maul studied the insect, then sent it on its way to rejoin the multitude that buzzed about the town.

His Master had shown him many places, but always under escort, and now he was suddenly on his own, a stranger on a strange world. He wondered if he might have found his way to a place like Dorvalla had it not been for Darth Sidious and the life he had provided. He had been raised to believe that he was extraordinary, and he had come to accept that. But every so often doubt would drift in of its own accord, and he would be left to wonder.

He shucked the mental intrusion and quickened his pace.

His Sith training allowed him to spot weaknesses of character or constitution in each of the various beings he passed. He drew on his dark-side instincts to guide him to the best means of carrying out his mission.

\* \* \*

Maul came to a halt at the entrance to a noisy cantina. It was the sort of place where anyone who entered would be appraised by the clientele within, so he moved quickly a blur to most; to others, just another laborer hurrying in out of the rain. He slid onto a stool at the bar, keeping his hood raised and his face in profile when the human female bartender approached.

"What can I get you, stranger?"

"Pure water," Maul growled.

"Big spender, huh?"

Maul made a negligent motion with his fingers. "You'll bring my drink and leave me alone."

The muscular, tattooed woman blinked twice. "I'll bring your drink and leave you alone."

Maul expanded his peripheral vision to take in the two adjoining rooms. He made use of the mirror behind the bar to see what his eyes could not, and he drew on the dark side to fill in the rest.

The cantina had an air of benign neglect, a smell of liquid inebriants and greasy food. The lighting was deliberately low. Flying insects of various sizes circled the illuminators, and children of several species ran in and out. Males and females fraternized openly, with a sense of levity or abandon. Music was provided by a ragtag band of Bith and fat Ortolans. Along the length of the bar Weequays conversed with Ugnaughts, Twi'leks with Gands. Maul was the only Iridonian in the place, but he was not the only sole representative of a species.

If some of the residents he had passed on the street were the hunters, the manka cats, here were the nerfs the cats fed on the ones who gave themselves over to intoxicants and games of chance and other vices. It was the sheer absence of discipline that sickened him. Discipline was the key to power. Unflinching discipline was what had forged him into a sword master and warrior. Discipline was what enabled him to defy gravity and slow the inrush of sensory input, so that he could move between the moments.

Maul sharpened his faculties, extending the range of his hearing to monitor nearby conversations. Most were as prosaic as he had expected them to be, revolving around gossip, flirtation, petty complaints, and future plans that would never be realized.

Then he heard the word sabotage, and his ears pricked up. The customer who had uttered it was a stout human, seated off to Maul's right in a booth along the cantina's rear wall. Another human sat opposite him, tall and dark complexioned. Both men wore the gray lightweight coveralls that were standard issue for employees of Lommite Limited, but the lack of lommite dust in their hair or on their clothes made it clear that they weren't miners.

A third man, straight-backed and robust-looking, approached while Maul watched out of the corner of his eye. Maul took a sip of water and turned slightly in the direction of the booth.

"I figured I'd find you two here," the new arrival said.

The stout one smiled and made room on the padded bench seat. "Step into our office and we'll buy you a drink."

The third man sat, but declined the offer with a shake of his head. "Maybe later."

The other two traded looks of surprise. Maul read the lip movements of the taller one: "If he's not drinking, then something serious has come up."

The third man nodded. "The chief has called a special meeting. He wants us at his place in half an hour."

"Any idea what it's about?" the stout one asked.

"It has to be the shuttle crash," the man opposite him surmised. "Bruit probably has a line on the culprits."

Maul recognized the name. Bruit was Lommite Limited's chief of field operations. The three men were probably security personnel.

"Like there was any question about the culprits," the stout one was saying.

"It's bigger than that," the third man said, lowering his voice almost to the point where Maul had to strain to hear him. "Word has come down from Arrant on how we're going to respond."

The stout man sat away from the table that bisected the booth. "Well, it's about time."

"I'd say that calls for another round of drinks," his partner said.

Maul continued listening, but his eyes were no longer fixed on the men but on something he had glimpsed on the wall above the booth. It resembled the

bioluminescent flitter he had captured earlier on. This one, however, wasn't moving from its spot on the wall. The reason became apparent once Maul probed it through the Force. Not only was it a fabrication, it was also a listening device.

Maul scanned the room, then turned to face the mirror. The device wasn't very sophisticated; its large size was evidence of that. Even so, that didn't mean that whoever was eavesdropping on the security men had to be inside the cantina. But Maul suspected that they were. Without looking at it, he focused his attention on the artificial flitter and screened out all extraneous soundsthe pulsing music, the dozens of separate conversations, the noises of glasses clinking or being filled with one inebriant or another. Once he could discern the muted beeping of the device's transmitter, he listened for signs of the receiver with which it was in communication.

At a round table in the adjoining room sat a Rodian and two Twi'leks, ostensibly engaged in a game of cardssabacc, in all likelihood. Maul watched them for a moment. Their playing was desultory. He observed their facial expressions as the security agents continued to converse. When one of the men said something of interest, the Rodian's faceted eyes would flash and his short snout would curl to one side. At the same time, the Twi'leks' head-tails would twitch and their pasty faces would flush ever so slightly.

The Rodian's left ear was sporting an earbead receiver, while the Twi'leks' receivers took the form of dermal patches, disguised as lekku tattoos.

Maul was certain that the trio were in the secret employ of Lommite Limited's onworld competitor, InterGalactic Ore. He recognized the Rodian from the disk Sidious had given him. It was possible that they were the saboteurs themselves.

His eyes darted back to the listening device and the security men. Creatures of habit, they probably occupied the same booth night after night, completely unaware that their conversations were being monitored. Such carelessness exasperated Maul to the point of fury. The men were deserving of whatever harm would surely come their way.

The three security men left the cantina on foot and wended their way to a ribbon of trail that wove through a dense stand of forest. Maul followed from a discreet distance, keeping to the shadows when Dorvalla's moon came up, full and silver-white.



The trail eventually arrived at a tight-knit community of flimsy dwellings, many of them raised on stilts to keep them above pools of runoff water left by the rain. The humidity was oppressive.

The dwelling that was the trio's destination was an elevated cube with a metal roof angled to channel rainwater into a ferrocrete cistern. The cube's only door was accessed by means of a ladderlike stairway. A rusted landspeeder with a cracked windscreen was parked in a muddy front lot.

Maul kept to the trees while a thickly built human responded to the stout agent's raps on the door frame.

"Come on up," the man said. "Everyone else is already here."

Bruit. Darth Maul waited until the three agents were inside, then he hurried from the shadows and planted himself under an open side window. Not content with his choice, he ducked beneath the house and clambered up one of the stilts to wedge himself between the floor joists of the front room. In the room above, someone was pouring liquid into several glasses.

Maul extracted a miniature recording device from the breast pocket of his utility suit and placed it against the underside of the rough-hewn floorboards.

"Here's the long and short of it," Bruit said while the glasses were being filled. "Arrant has decided that we need to level the playing field. We're going to strike at InterGal at Eriadu. Our shipments will reach the planet, and theirs won't."

Someone whistled in astonishment.

"Does the boss realize what he's letting loose?" perhaps the same man asked. "This is going to lead to a shooting war."

"This comes straight from Arrant," Bruit said. "He's been in the trenches before. Those are his words, and this is his show."

"His show and our livelihood," someone pointed out. "There has to be a better way of settling this. What about petitioning the senate to intervene?"

"A cure that can be worse than the disease," another answered, much to Maul's amusement. "The senate will defer to committees run by corrupt bureaucrats. It will take months for it to get to the courts."

"No senate, no courts," Bruit said. "That much has already been decided. It's up to us."

"So what happens at Eriadu?"

"We've been able to learn the hyperspace route InterGal's ships are going to take. They'll arrive by way of Rimma 13, and are scheduled to decant from hyperspace at 1400 hours, Eriadu local time. The folks we're employing to execute the strike will be able to calculate the precise reentry coordinates."

"Who are we employing?"

"The Toom clan."

Expressions of dismay flew from all corners.

"Cutthroats," someone said.

"Exactly," Bruit said. "But we need to team up to accomplish this, and Arrant's willing to spend the necessary credits. By using them, no one will suspect us, and Arrant doesn't care, because he doesn't want to know any more than he has to. He wants to keep his hands clean while I make the connections. Besides, the Tooms have the means to get the job done."

"And no scruples to stand in the way."

"Have they agreed to terms?"

"At first contact," Bruit said. "Although I have to say that I sometimes wish I could see both Lommite and InterGal brought down, so that someone with real foresight could build a better organization from the dregs."

Several glasses clinked together.

"So what's our part in this, Chief, if the deal has already been struck?"

Bruit snorted. "We need to prepare ourselves for InterGal's counterpunch."

Maul peeled the recorder from the floorboards and dropped down to the loamy soil below the house. He remained still for a long moment, crouched in the darkness, listening to sounds of distant laughter and the stridulations of profuse insect life. Then he thought back to Coruscant, and the question his Master had put to him regarding his double-bladed lightsaber.

It made sense to me to be able to strike with both ends, Maul had answered.

With a note of approval, his Master had said, You must bear that in mind when you go to Dorvalla.

Maul reached within his cloak and unclipped the long cylinder from his belt. One end, then the other, Maul told himself. Both, to effect a single purpose.

Maul waited until the moon was low in the sky before he went to Lommite Limited's headquarters at the base of the escarpment. The incidents of sabotage had caused the complex of buildings to be placed on high alert. Armed sentries, some accompanied by leashed beasts, patrolled, and powerful illuminators cast circles of brilliant light over the spacious grounds. A five-meter-high electrified stun fence encompassed everything.

Maul spent an hour studying the movements of the sentries, the periodic sweeps of the illuminators, the towering fence, and the motion detector lasers that gridded the broad lawn beyond. He was certain that infrared cams were scanning the grounds, but there was little he could do about those without leaving evidence of his infiltration. A probe droid would have been able to tell him all he needed to know, but there wasn't time and he wanted to do this personally.

To test the possibility that pressure detectors had been installed in the ground, he used the Force to propel stones over the fence. As they struck specific places on the lawn, he waited for some response, but the guards stationed at the entry gates simply continued to go about their business.

When he was satisfied that he had committed the results of his reconnaissance to memory, he shrugged out of his cloak and leapt straight up over the fence, landing precisely where some of the rocks he had tossed rested. Then he sprang to a series of other sites that ultimately carried him to the wall of the principal

building, moving with such speed the entire time that whatever holorecordings were being made wouldn't show him unless they were played in slow motion.

He reached one of the doors and found it locked, so he began to work his way around the building, testing other doors and windows, all of which were similarly secured.

He tested the building's flat roof for motion and pressure detectors as he had the lawn. Vaulting to the top, he was confronted with an expanse of solar arrays, skylights, and cooling ducts. He moved to the nearest skylight and ignited his lightsaber. He was ready to plunge the blade through the transparisteel panel when he stopped himself, and peered more intently at the panel. Embedded in the transparisteel were monofilament chains, which, when severed, would trip an alarm.

Deactivating the blade, he reclinped his lightsaber and sat down to think. It was unlikely that Lommite Limited's central computer was a stand-alone machine. It would have to be accessible from outside locations. Bruit would have remote access. Maul berated himself for not having recognized that fact earlier. But it wasn't too late to rectify his oversight.

\* \* \*

Maul returned to Bruit's dwelling just before sunrise. Unlike the headquarters complex, the stilted house had no security. The chief of field operations either didn't have enemies or didn't care, one way or the other. Perhaps Bruit was that resigned to fate, Maul thought. It scarcely mattered, in any case.

He circled the house, occasionally chinning himself on the windowsills to peer inside. In a rear room Bruit was sprawled atop a knocked-together bed, half in, half out of a net tent that was meant to keep nocturnal insects from feasting on his blood. He was fully clothed, snoring lightly, and dead drunk. A half-emptied bottle of brandy sat on a small table alongside the bed.

Maul gritted his teeth. More carelessness, more lack of discipline. He couldn't summon any compassion for the man. The weak needed to be weeded out.

Maul let himself in through the unlocked door and scanned the front room. Bruit was a man of few worldly possessions, and not a particularly orderly one. His dwelling was as chaotic as his life appeared to be. The confined space smelled of

spoiled food, and lommite dust coated every horizontal surface. Water dripped from a sink faucet that could have easily been repaired. Arachnids had woven perfect webs in all four corners of the room.

Maul searched for Bruit's personal computer and located it in the bedroom. It was a portable device, not much longer than a human hand. He called the machine to him and activated it. The display screen came to life and a menu presented itself. It took only moments for Maul to find his way to Lommite Limited's central computer, but for the second time that night he found himself locked out.

The computer was demanding to see Bruit's fingerprints.

Maul might have been able to slice his way inside the central computer, but not without leaving an easily followed trail. What is done in secret has great power, his Master had said.

Maul gazed at Bruit. With a scant motion of his left hand, he caused the man to roll over onto his back. Born of some uneasy dream, a prolonged groan escaped the human. Maul gestured for Bruit's right arm to rise, wrist bent, with the palm of his hand facing outward. Then he stealthily carried the computer to Bruit's hand, easing the display screen into gentle contact with the outstretched fingers. When the machine had toodled an acknowledgment, Maul dropped Bruit's arm and rolled him back onto his side.

By the time Maul left the bedroom, the directories for the database were scrolling onscreen. Maul pinpointed the files relating to the imminent Eriadu delivery and opened them.

The cantina was doing a brisk lunchtime business when Darth Maul stole through the entrance and took a seat at a corner table in the smaller room. Outside, a gloomy downpour was inundating the town. He kept the dripping hood of his cloak raised, and he angled himself away from the crowd, ignoring the few second glances he received.

Two of Lommite Limited's security men occupied their usual booth, feeding their faces with fatty foods and talking with their mouths full. Not far from where Maul was seated, the Rodian and the two Twi'leks he had identified the previous evening as agents of InterGalactic Ore were gathered around a card table. Shortly the three were joined by a dark-haired human female, who placed a

stack of company credits on the table and joined the sabacc game in progress. Maul recognized the piece of cuff jewelry that adorned the woman's left ear as a receiver.

He waited to act until the four of them were engaged in monitoring the security agents' conversation. Then, with a slight motion of his hand, he Force-summoned the listening device to peel itself from the wall above the booth, zip into the small room, and alight at the center of the card table.

The Rodian sat back, startled, clearly failing to recognize the artificial bug as their own device. "A new player joins the game."

One of the Twi'leks raised his open hand to shoulder level. "Not for long."

The Twi'lek's long-nailed hand was halfway toward smashing the flitter when the human female grabbed hold of his wrist and managed to deflect the downward strike.

"Hold on," she whispered urgently. "I heard your voice."

"That's because I said something," the Twi'lek said.

"In my earpiece," the woman said, gesturing discreetly. "And now I'm hearing my voice."

"I'm hearing your voice," the Rodian said, confused.

"What in the name of . . . ."

The Twi'lek allowed his voice to trail off, and all four of the agents sat back in their stiff wooden chairs, gazing in astonishment at the listening device.

"It's ours," the woman said finally.

The Rodian glanced at her. "What's it doing here?"

Maul called on the Force to move the bug.

"It's crawling around, is what it's doing," one of the Twi'leks said, with a measure of distress. He glanced over his shoulder at the preoccupied security men, then at his comrades.

Maul activated the remote control he had tuned to the frequency of the insect transmitter.

"This comes straight from the Toom clan," the bug sent to the earpieces and dermal audio patches worn by the conspirators, all of whom traded wide-eyed looks.

"Here's the long and short of it. Arrant has decided to move against InterGalactic Ore shipments. No petitioning the senate. He's letting loose a shooting war. That much has already been decided."

Absorbed in what she was hearing, the woman used her right forefinger to tilt the ear cuff for clearer reception.

"The Toom clan has a way of settling this a cure for the disease. InterGal can level the playing field by employing us to strike at Eriadu. We of the Toom clan wish to see LL brought down. Someone with real foresight could build a better organization from the dregs.

"We've been able to learn the hyperspace route Lommite Limited's ships are going to take to Eriadu, and the precise reentry coordinates. They'll arrive by way of Rimma 18, and are scheduled to decant from hyperspace at 1300 hours, Eriadu local time.

"We've been in the trenches. This is our livelihood. We can intervene and execute the strike. The Tooms have the means to get the job done. No one will suspect us. We have no scruples about what happens.

"To team up to accomplish this, be willing to spend the credits necessary. Contact us."

Maul had spent all morning adulterating the recording he had made during the meeting at Bruit's dwelling, and modifying the resequenced phrases to sound as if they had been uttered by a single individual. The result appeared to be having the desired effect. The four agents were continuing to stare at the bug they

themselves had installed. The woman's mouth was slightly ajar, and the Twi'leks' head-tails were twitching.

Maul was pleased to hear the Rodian say, "This has to go directly to the top and I mean now."

The Toom clan had a motto: "Pay us enough and we'll make worlds collide."

They had started out as legitimate rescue workers and salvagers, using a powerful Interdictor ship to retrieve ships stranded in hyperspace. By mimicking the effects of a mass shadow, the Interdictor had the ability to pull endangered ships back into realspace. While the rewards for such work were substantial, they were never substantial enough to satisfy the desires of the clan, and over the course of several years, the group had launched a second career as pirates, employing their Interdictor against passenger and supply ships, or hiring themselves out to criminal organizations to interfere with shipments of spice and other proscribed goods.

However, unlike the Hutts and Black Sun, both of which could usually be relied upon to honor the terms of any agreement, the Toom clan was motivated solely by profit. A small outfit, they couldn't afford the luxury of turning down jobs out of respect for some hazy criminal ethical stance that had made them outcasts even among their own kind.

Headquartered in an underground base deep in Dorvalla's unpopulated northern wastes, the clan received routine payoffs from both Lommite Limited and InterGalactic Ore, to ensure the safety of their shuttles and ore barges. The Tooms used much of the funds to bribe the commanders of Dorvalla's volunteer space corps to ensure the clan's own safety with the understanding that the clan would refrain from operating within the Videnda sector.

Because Eriadu was outside the sector and notwithstanding the fact that they were already receiving payoffs from InterGalactic the clan had accepted Lommite Limited's generous offer of Republic credits to perform a bit of sabotage work. InterGalactic would simply have to understand that the nature of their arrangement with the Toom clan had changed. More important, the contract with LL didn't preclude the possibility of the clan's entering into a similar contract with InterGalas certainly might be the case after the Eriadu operation. In fact, the clan had every intention of contacting InterGal to suggest as much.



No one in the clan had expected InterGalactic to contact them before Eriadu.

A leather-faced Weequay, Nort Toom himself accepted the holotransmission from Caba'Zan, head of security for InterGalactic Ore. The clan was mostly made up of far-from-home Weequay and Nikto humanoids, but Aqualish, Abyssin, Barabels, and Gamorreans also numbered among the mix.

"I want to discuss the most recent offer you tendered," Caba'Zan's holopresence began. He was a near-human Falleen, burly and green complexioned.

"Our most recent offer," Nort Toom said carefully.

"About destroying Lommite Limited's ships at Eriadu."

Toom's deep-set eyes darted between the holoprojector and one of his Weequay confederates, who was standing nearby. "Oh, that offer. We have so many operations in the works, it's sometimes hard to keep track."

"I'm glad to hear that business is good," Caba'Zan said disingenuously.

"I've a feeling it's about to get even better."

The Falleen came directly to the point. "We're willing to pay one hundred thousand Republic credits."

Toom tried to keep from celebrating. The offer was twice what Patch Bruit had paid. "You'll have to go to two hundred thousand."

Caba'Zan shook his hairless head. "We can go as high as one fifty if you can guarantee results."

"Done," Toom said. "When we see that the credits have been transferred, we'll make the necessary arrangements."

Caba'Zan looked dubious. "You're certain about the reentry coordinates for LL's ships, and the time of their decanting at Eriadu?"

"Maybe we should go over that one more time," Toom said.

"You said Rimma 18, at 1300 Eriadu local unless something has changed."

"Only for the better," Toom said reassuringly. "Only for the better."

"And you'll make it look like an accident."

"That's probably the best way of handling it, don't you think?"

"We don't want InterGalactic implicated."

"We'll make certain."

Toom deactivated the holoprojector and sat back, clamping his huge hands behind his head.

"Do you think they know about LL's hiring us?" his confederate asked in obvious incredulity.

"It didn't sound that way to me."

"InterGalactic is offering three times as much as Lommite. Are we going to return Bruit's money?"

Toom sat forward with determination. "I don't see any reason for that. We just have to make sure we can execute both contracts." He grinned broadly. "I have to admit that this appeals to my sense of unfair play."

"You mean"

"Exactly. We sabotage everyone's ships."

Eriadu was an up-and-coming world in the outlying star systems. Situated close to the intersection of the Rimma Trade Route and the Hydian Way, Eriadu demonstrated a fierce devotion to industry, in the hope of achieving its goal of becoming the most important planet in the sector. To that end Eriadu had even developed a small shipbuilding enterprise, owned and operated by distant cousins of Supreme Chancellor Valorum, who chaired the Galactic Senate on Coruscant.

Eriadu's orbital facilities paled in comparison to similar ones at Corellia and Kuat, but among the smaller shipyards, Eriadu's were second only to those at Sluis Van, rimward and just off the principal trade routes.

Eriadu's lieutenant governor had done much to facilitate the burgeoning partnership between Eriadu and Dorvalla, emphasizing the senselessness of Eriadu's importing lommite from the Inner Rim when Dorvalla was practically a celestial neighbor. The quantities of ore required by Eriadu Manufacturing and Valorum Shipping were such that neither LL nor InterGal could have filled the orders on their own, but Lieutenant Governor Tarkin saw no dilemma in that. He insisted that he hadn't set things up as a contest, but there was no denying that it was anything but. Tarkin was even on record as saying that the company awarded the lucrative contract would probably be able to effect a financial takeover of the loser.

Tarkin had arranged for one of Eriadu's orbital habitats to host a ceremony to endorse the potential partnership, with all the cardinal players present: Jurnel Arrant and his counterpart at InterGalactic, the executive officers of Eriadu Manufacturing and Valorum Shipping, a plethora of business personnel who stood to gain from the new partnership, and, of course, Tarkin himself, representing Eriadu's political interests.

Sporting the finest in robes and tunics, everyone was gathered on the esplanade level of the orbital facility, awaiting the arrival of the ore barges LL and InterGal had dispatched. The separate flotillas were scheduled to arrive within an hour of each other, local time.

"I'm certain that this will be an auspicious day for all of us," the lieutenant governor was telling Arrant and the head of Eriadu Manufacturing. Tarkin was a slight man, with a quick mind and an even quicker temper. He stood as rigidly as a military commander, and his blue eyes held neither humor nor empathy.

"Tell me, Arrant," the manufacturing executive said, "do you foresee a time when Lommite Limited, on its own, could supply enough ore to meet the demands we're projecting for the near future?"

"Of course," Arrant answered confidently. "It's simply a matter of expanding our operations." He turned and tugged Patch Bruit into the conversation. "Bruit, here, is our field supervisor, among other things. He has just notified me of a rich find, not a hundred kilometers from our present headquarters."

Bruit nodded. "Our survey teams" he started to say, when one of LL's security agents cut him off.

"Chief, I'm sorry to bust in, but we need to talk in private."

Arrant watched worriedly as Bruit allowed himself to be led away.

"What's going on?" Bruit demanded when he and the security man were just out of earshot.

"Something has yanked the barges out of hyperspace short of their reentry coordinates. We don't know the cause. It might be a problem with the hyperspace generators, or maybe an uncharted mass shadow."

Bruit heard people gasp behind him. When he turned, everyone's attention was fixed on the huge monitor screens that displayed views of the orbital shipyards. Some distance from the shipyards, and way off course, several lackluster space barges were reverting to realspace.

"Bruit, are those our vessels?" Arrant asked in mounting concern.

"Yes, but there has to be a good reason for their decanting early."

"This is most unexpected," Tarkin remarked. "Most unexpected."

The well-bedecked crowd gasped again. Bruit watched in shock as a second group of ships began to emerge from hyperspace.

"InterGalactic," his security man said in disbelief.

"They're going to collide!" someone said.

"Bruit!" Arrant screamed, as the color drained from his face. "Do something!"

What Bruit did was look away.

The screams and cries, the groans and sobs, the strobes of explosive light flashing across the polished floor of the habitat's esplanade deck told him everything he needed to know. LL's and InterGal's barges had been manipulated

into mass collisions. Without looking, Bruit could see the lommite ore streaming from fractured hulls, turning local space as white as the molten anger that seethed behind Bruit's tightly shut eyelids.

"The Toom clan," he barked to his security man. "They've double-crossed us."

Someone collided with Bruit from behind. It was Jurnel Arrant, backing away from the display screens in numb horror.

"We're ruined," he mumbled. "We're ruined."

Bruit cleared his head with a shake and clamped his hands on the shoulders of the security man. "Send a message to Caba'Zan at InterGalactic," he ordered. "Tell him that we need to meet as soon as possible."

Lovingly crafted, the listening device was a perfect facsimile of a fire flitter. It sat between Bruit and Caba'Zan on a low table in Bruit's living room, singing its song:

"Here's the long and short of it. Arrant has decided to move against InterGalactic Ore shipments. No petitioning the senate. He's letting loose a shooting war. That much has already been decided . . . ."

Caba'Zan ran a hand over his bald pate. "Strange. It almost sounds like your voice."

Bruit squeezed his eyes shut, then opened them and looked the Falleen in the eye. "That's because underneath the warping, it is my voice. I spoke those words most of them anyway right in this room."

Caba'Zan's forehead wrinkled. "I don't understand."

"I was briefing my men about the plan for InterGal's ships at Eriadu. Someone recorded the conversation."

"One of your men?"

Bruit shook his head in dismay. "I don't know."

"One of the Toom clan, then."

Bruit took his lower lip between his teeth. "Then why the need to warp the recording, and put on a song-and-dance show for your people in the cantina? Besides, there's no way the Tooms could have gained access to LL's database and gotten the reentry coordinates for our ships. They're not that clever. It has to have been one of your men."

"They're not that clever," Caba'Zan said. "Or that industrious. We wouldn't have known anything about your plans if it wasn't for the bug."

Bruit silenced the facsimile flitter and worked his jaw in vexation. "I'll figure out who it was later on. After I deal with the Toom clan."

Caba'Zan narrowed his eyes. "They played us both for fools, Bruit. If you're implying vengeance, I want some of the action."

Secreted beneath the stilted dwelling, Darth Maul smiled to himself, dropped to the ground, and hurried into the darkness.

Maul never doubted that the Toom clan would enter into contracts with both mining companies. Nor did he think that the clan would fail to deliver on its promise to sabotage the ships. Thus he had had no need to go to Eriadu to witness the fatal collisions. Instead he had passed the time watching members of the Toom clan shut down and abandon the base on Dorvalla. Surmising correctly that their betrayal would unite LL and InterGal against them even briefly the mercenaries had decided to abscond while they could.

Maul had trailed them to Riome, a small, ice-covered world deeper in the Dorvalla system, where the clan already had established a secret base.

A more astute group of outlaws might have elected to put as much distance as possible between themselves and Dorvalla. But perhaps the Toom clan was convinced that even the combined security forces of Lommite Limited and InterGalactic Ore wouldn't be a match for them. Whichever, Maul's next task was to make certain that Bruit learned the location of the Riome sanctuary by planting evidence at the site of the clan's former base.

Maul spent a full day in frigid temperatures and howling winds, waiting for Bruit and his men to arrive. Armed with blasters and an assortment of more powerful weapons, they raced from the shuttle that had delivered them from Dorvalla's

equator and stormed the underground base. Accompanying them was a male Falleen and several aliens who answered to him, including the four saboteurs Maul had deceived in the cantina.

Frustrated to find the base deserted, they began a search for clues as to the mercenaries' whereabouts. For too long Maul was convinced that he would have to intrude on their sloppy search and rub their noses in the evidence he had so artfully sown. But ultimately they discovered it on their own.

Maul was inside his ship when Bruit and the rest reboarded the shuttle and launched, presumably for Riome. The thought of the impending contest invigorated him. He thrilled at the prospect of being able to participate.

Riome loomed white as death in the blackness of space.

In his smaller and faster craft, Maul arrived ahead of Bruit's mixed squad of would-be avengers. His ship hugged the snow-covered terrain, racing over rolling foothills and skirting the edge of a turbulent gray sea studded with islands of craggy ice. Maul had seen no sign of the clan's Interdictor ship in orbit, and assumed that the mercenaries had concealed it in the asteroid field coreward of Riome.

In establishing a base, the mercenaries had found the warmest spot on the small world. It was an area of active volcanism, with immense glaciers pocked with ice-blue light, and patches of coarse grassland, through which bubbled dark pools of magma-heated water. The base itself was a series of interlinked semicylindrical bunkers that had once sheltered a team of scientists. Through the long intervening years, the scientists' abandoned droids and equipment had become outlandish ice sculptures.

Maul landed his ship a kilometer from the base. As on his first visit, he found no evidence of a radar installation. He watched Bruit's shuttle drop from azure skies, fly over the complex, and set down on a circle of permacrete, alongside a disk-shaped Corellian freighter and a gunship of equal size.

The Toom clan could not have been unaware of the shuttle's arrival, but Bruit had managed to catch the mercenaries unprepared nevertheless. His force of twenty emerged from the shuttle aboard a troop carrier equipped with both repulsorlift engines and weighty tracks for surface-effect locomotion. The clan rallied a quick defense, loosing blaster bolts from retrofitted firing holes and a

self-contained laser cannon emplacement. The aggressors answered with the troop carrier's top-mounted repeater blasters and rocket launchers, making it abundantly clear that they were resolved to win the day.

Cyan laser bolts clipped the carrier's repulsorlifts and sent it coiling deeply into the snow. Clothed in cold-weather gear and helmets fitted with tinted face bowls, Bruit's legion leapt from ranks of bench seats. A direct hit from the laser cannon blew the carrier to pieces. Molten bits of alloy fountained into the thin air, sizzling as they showered to the frozen ground.

The forces of the mining companies fanned out and began a methodical advance on the bunkers, finding shelter behind boulders that had been carried down the mountainsides by glaciers. What Bruit didn't know, however, was that the base couldn't be taken by a frontal assault, in any case, by a mere handful of men wielding twenty-year-old weapons. The lead bunker had been fortified with blast doors, and the coarse grass apron that fronted it was impregnated with fragmentation mines and other traps.

Maul decided that he had to show himself.

He appeared briefly on a rise, east of the base, a two-legged stranger dressed in a long cloak, deep black against the snowfield. The assailants took him for one of the clan and immediately opened fire. Maul propelled himself over the rise with leaps and bounds, though scarcely of the sort of which he was capable. Bruit did the wise thing and split his team, figuring, as Maul predicted he would, that the lone enemy knew another way into the base.

Maul kept himself in plain sight, dodging the blaster bolts fired by his pursuers, without using his lightsaber. He couldn't have been a better guide if he had been one of them. Briefly hidden by a snowdrift, he called on the Force to twirl himself deeply into the white wave. From the depths of his self-excavated tomb, he heard Bruit's men dash for the relatively undefended entrance to which he had led them.

Maul waited until he was certain that the last of them had disappeared through the entrance. Then he corkscrewed out of the ice cavity and followed them inside. The sibilant reports of blasters and the acrid smell of fire and cauterized flesh had brought his blood to a near boil, and he came close to drawing his lightsaber and rushing headlong into the fray. But slaughter was not his intent.



His Master's plans would be better served if the miners and the mercenaries killed each other though Maul might yet have to dispose of the ultimate victors.

Judging by the way the assault was progressing, it was Bruit's forces that would be left standing at the end. Despite being outgunned and outnumbered, the miners' assault was invigorated by the wrath of the betrayed. Even with a third of their group already wounded or dead, Bruit and his InterGalactic analog persevered, continuing to bring the fight to the Toom clan, which held the rear of the bunker, behind overturned laboratory counters and assorted pieces of instrumentation.

Explosions from the front bunker indicated that Bruit's teammates had blundered their way into the minefield. Shortly, the survivors were turning their weapons loose against the blast doors in an attempt to burn their way through.

Maul scampered along the long wall of the central bunker and found a place from which he could observe the fighting. To contain his eagerness, he gave himself over to evaluating the combat techniques of one contestant or another, making something of a game of anticipating who would be killed by whom, and at just what moment. His predictions grew more and more accurate as the opposing sides drew closer together.

A powerful detonation rocked the front bunker. The blast doors slid open with a prolonged grating sound, and five assailants stormed through a swirling cloud of dense smoke. Two were cut down before they had gone ten meters. The rest angled for the sides of the bunker and began to work their way forward.

The ferocity of the fighting made it apparent that neither side would tolerate surrender. It was a battle to the death as Maul preferred it, in any case. His attention was drawn time and again to Patch Bruit. For all the disorder in his life, Bruit's displays of daring made him deserving of the lofty position he held in Lommite Limited. Maul was impressed. He didn't want to see Bruit fall to the mercenaries, who were nothing more than the blasters they cowered behind.

Bruit and the Falleen led the final charge, their combined forces going hand to hand with Weequay and Aqualish members of the clan, whose weapons were exhausted. The miners showed them no mercy, and in moments the battle was over, with Bruit, the Falleen, and five others left standing amid the carnage.

Maul wondered briefly if he could leave things as they stood. Bruit would report back to Lommite Limited's executive officer that the Toom clan had double-crossed both companies, and that they had paid with their lives for their betrayal. But it was unlikely that Bruit would let it rest at that. He would want to know who had assembled the adulterated recording, and he might even learn that the information about LL's shipping route to Eriadu had been accessed through his personal computer. Then he would begin to think again about the cantina bug, and perhaps he would scrutinize whatever surveillance recordings were available. For all Maul knew, images of an Iridonian with a face full of red and black tattoos might appear in one them.

Of course, there was no danger of his being traced to Coruscant, much less to his Master's lair. But the last thing he wanted was for Darth Sidious to see his apprentice's face turn up on some HoloNet most-wanted list.

Maul had to finish what he had begun.

He drew his lightsaber, ignited it at both ends, and leapt down to the floor of the prefab bunker.

Bruit, the Falleen, and the others spun around when they heard the resonant thrumming of his weapon, which Maul whirled over his head and around his shoulders. But no one fired. They stood staring at him, as if he were some hallucination born of bloodlust or snow blindness.

Maul realized that he would have to goad them into doing what he needed them to do. He began to march forward, glowering at them with his yellow eyes and showing his teeth, and at last someone fired the Rodian from the cantina. Maul deflected the bolt straight back at him with the lower of his blades and kept coming.

"We have no fight with you, Jedi," the Falleen yelled.

The remark brought Maul up short.

"This is our business," the humanoid went on. "It doesn't concern Coruscant."

Maul growled and advanced.

Crouching suddenly, a Twi'lek fired, and Maul twirled, deflecting the bolts with his twin crimson blades. The Twi'lek and another security man dropped.

Then the rest opened fire at once. Maul leapt and jinked, spun and rolled, an acrobatic wonder, impossible to target. He stopped once to raise his hand and pepper his opponents with a flurry of Force-hurled glassware and sharp instruments. He turned blasters against each other and wrenched one fighter down onto a table with enough force to snap the man's spine.

His hand weapon depleted, the Falleen rushed him. Maul spun through a fleet kick, breaking the Falleen's arm. Then, without lowering his leg, he broke the security chief's neck.

Only Bruit remained. Gaping at Maul in disbelief, he let his blaster drop from his rigid hand. Maul continued to approach, the lightsaber held off to one side, its blades horizontal to the floor.

"I don't know how, and I don't know why," Bruit began, "but I know that you must be responsible for everything that's happened."

Maul decided to hear him out.

"You recorded my conversations. Then you altered the recordings to trick the saboteurs you had identified in the cantina. You probably arranged for us to find this place." Bruit gestured broadly. "Can I at least know why before you kill me?"

"It is something that had to be done for a larger purpose."

Bruit cocked his head, as if he hadn't heard Maul correctly.

Maul gazed at him. "You needn't dwell on it."

He raised his energy blade, preparing to thrust it into Bruit's chest, then restrained himself. A lightsaber wound wouldn't do, not at all. Deactivating the blade, he raised his right hand and made a vise of his gloved fingers. Bruit's hands flew to his windpipe, and he began to gasp for breath.

Jurnel Arrant was in his office when he received the details of Bruit's death on Riome. The messenger was a judicial agent, who had been dispatched from Coruscant at Arrant's request.

"I'm to blame for this entire business," Arrant said in a tone of anguished confession. "I'm guilty of ordering Bruit to bring in outsiders to do the dirty work. I escalated this conflict."

The lommite ore could still be mined, but LL no longer had enough barges to transport it. Replacing them would cost more than the company was currently worth. From what Arrant had learned, InterGalactic was in the same fix.

Anger gripped him. "I'm convinced that the Neimoidians with the Trade Federation got to the Toom clan and paid them to sabotage our ships, along with InterGalactic's."

"That will be difficult to prove," the judicial said. "The Toom clan has been effectively wiped out, and unless you can produce evidence to support your theory, we can't show good cause for interrogating the Neimoidians." He was about to add something when Arrant cut him off.

"Bruit was a good man. He shouldn't have died as he did."

The judicial frowned, then prized a wafer-thin audio device from the pocket of his tunic and placed it on Arrant's desk. "Before you beat yourself to a pulp, you might want to listen to this."

Arrant picked up the device. "What is it?"

"A recording found at the Toom clan's base, here on Dorvalla. It's incomplete, but there's enough to warrant your attention."

Arrant activated the wafer's play function.

"I wish to see both Lommite and InterGal brought down," a male voice said, "so that someone with real foresight could build a better organization from the dregs."

Arrant's eyes widened in nervous astonishment. "That's Bruit!"

"I understand," a second male voice was saying. "I want some of the action."

Arrant paused the playback. "Who's"

"Caba'Zan," the judicial supplied. "Former head of security for InterGalactic Ore."

Reluctantly, Arrant reactivated the device.

"We need to team up to accomplish this," Bruit said. "No one will suspect us, and Arrant doesn't need to know any more than he has to."

"He's not that clever."

"The Toom's have the means to get the job done. We're going to make a move against everyone at Eriadu"

Arrant silenced the device and pushed it away from him. "I don't know what to say."

The judicial agent nodded, tight-lipped.

Arrant got to his feet and spent a long moment gazing out the window. When he turned, his expression was bleak. He touched a key on the intercom pad, and seconds later his protocol droid secretary entered the office.

"How may I be of service, sir?"

Arrant glanced up at the droid. "I need to make two holocalls. The first will be to the chief executive of InterGalactic Ore, to discuss terms of a possible merger."

"And the second, sir?"

Arrant took a moment to reply. "The second call will be to Viceroy Nute Gunray, to discuss terms of granting the Trade Federation exclusive rights to the shipping and distribution of Dorvalla's lommite ore."

In a dank, fungus-encrusted grotto on the Neimoidian homeworld, Hath Monchar and Viceroy Nute Gunray received a startlingly sudden holovisit from Darth Sidious. First to reach the holoprojector and the cloaked apparition that was the Dark Lord of the Sith, Monchar inclined his lumpish head in a servile bow and spread his thick-fingered hands.

"Welcome, Lord Sidious," he said.

Though his eyes remained concealed by the cloak's raised hood, Sidious seemed to be gazing through Monchar at Gunray, who was perched atop his claw-footed mechno-chair a few meters away.

"Viceroy," Sidious rasped. "Dismiss your underling, so that we may speak in private about recent events on Dorvalla."

Monchar stared openly at Sidious, then whirled on Gunray. "But, Viceroy, I was the one who made contact with Lommite Limited. I deserve at least some of the credit for what has occurred."

"Viceroy," Sidious said, with a bit more menace, "advise your underling that his contributions in this matter were inconsequential."

Gunray glanced nervously at Monchar. "You had better leave."

"But"

"Nowbefore he gets angry."

Monchar's gut sack made a sickening growl as he hurried from the grotto.

Gunray slid off the mechno-chair and approached the holoprojector. He had a jutting lower jaw, and his thick lower lip was uncompanied. A deep fissure separated his bulging forehead into two lateral lobes. His skin was kept a healthy gray-blue by means of frequent meals of the finest fungus. Red and orange robes of exquisite hand fell from his narrow shoulders, along with a round-collared brown surplice that reached his knees.

"I apologize for the indiscretion of my deputy," he said. "He is high-strung from too many rich foods."

Sidious's face betrayed nothing. "Apology accepted, Viceroy."

"Hath Monchar regards me much as I regard you, Lord Sidious: with a mix of awe and fear."

"You need fear me only if you fail me, Viceroy."

Gunray seemed to take the remark under advisement. "I have been anticipating your visit, Lord Sidious. Though I confess that I had no idea you were aware of events on Dorvalla much less that the Trade Federation had an interest in the planet."

"You will find that there are few matters of which I am unaware, Viceroy. What's more, we have not seen the last of Dorvalla. There is something we will need to attend to in due course."

"But, Lord Sidious, the matter has been resolved. Lommite Limited and InterGalactic Ore have merged to become Dorvalla Mining, but the Trade Federation will transport the ore, and will now represent Dorvalla in the Galactic Senate."

"More important, you have a permanent place on the directorate."

Gunray bowed his head. "That, too, Lord Sidious."

"Then the stage is set for the next act."

"May I ask what that will entail?"

"I will inform you at the appropriate time. Until then, there are other matters I will see to, to secure the power base of the Trade Federation and to strengthen your personal position."

"We are not deserving of your attention."

"Then strive to make yourself deserving, Viceroy, so that our partnership will continue to prosper."

Gunray gulped loudly. "I will do little else, Lord Sidious."

In his lair on Coruscant, Darth Sidious deactivated the holoprojector and turned to face Darth Maul.

"Do you find them any more trustworthy than before?"

"More frightened, Master," Maul said from his cross-legged posture on the floor, "which may achieve the same end result."

Sidious made an affirmative sound. "We are not through with them yet not for some time to come."

"I begin to understand, Master."

Sidious's mouth approximated a grin of approval. "You did not disappoint me at Dorvalla, Darth Maul."

"My Master," Maul said, slightly bowing his head.

Sidious studied him for a moment. "I sense that you enjoyed being out on your own."

Maul lifted his face. "My thoughts are open to you, Master."

"I see," Sidious said slowly. "Temper your enthusiasm, my young apprentice. Soon I will have another task for you to discharge."

Maul waited.

"Familiarize yourself with the workings of the criminal organization known as Black Sun. And while you're doing that, return to your warrior training. Your lightsaber may very well come in handy for what I require next."

## **Obi-Wan**

In the lower levels of Coruscant, Obi-Wan Kenobi is investigating the harassment of various citizens by a criminal element known as the Black Heth. Upon returning to the Jedi Temple and informing the Jedi Council of his findings, the Jedi Council soon becomes aware of a Quarren insider within the Black Heth, who has now been captured.

Rather than allow this pro-Republic agent to be left to the gang's tender mercies, the Council sends Obi-Wan into a skyscraper (still under construction) to infiltrate the Black Heth's inner defenses. Obi-Wan manages to save the



infiltrator, but what he learns points to arms being smuggled onto Coruscant in hopes of turning the entire planet into a Black Heth-controlled warzone.

In the continuing investigation, Obi-Wan is again sent out on his own, this time to plant a tracking device on one of the arms-delivery ships. He is successful in doing so, but in the process, he is forced to do battle with alien warriors with cortosis ore blades, whom he soon learns are the Jin'Ha.

Rather than sending Obi-Wan into harm's way again (well, at least not immediately), Jedi Council members Plo Koon and Eeth Koth are sent to follow the tracking device.

When their signal is lost, Qui-Gon Jinn and Obi-Wan are sent to the planet Obredaan to investigate. There, they find a Jin'Ha base. They are able to rescue their fellow Jedi, but what is more disturbing is the revelation that it is indeed cortosis ore being mined on Obredaan . . . and it is being sent to the Neimoidian Trade Federation . . .

### **Sarlaac Showdown**

Tatooine has always been a rough and tumble planet where survival of the fittest is the only rule. Gangs of criminals dominate the populace, and a constant cold war between opposing groups means that most people keep their heads down and their noses out of others' business. That said, everyone has their own agenda, especially when there's money to be made.

A pair of Dark Side Acolytes recently made their way to Tatooine, following up on a lead that a spy "acquired" some crystals from the planet Ilum -- the same kind used in the manufacture of lightsabers. Obviously, such a prize would raise their status among the forces of the dark side, and the two acolytes managed to discover the name of the Aqualish who had the crystals. They tracked him down, stalking him through the dusty streets of Anchorhead, and waited for just the right moment to strike.

The Aqualish Spy did indeed possess a few of the precious crystals and, desperate to stay alive until he could find a buyer, gathered together a small coterie of bodyguards and thugs - - along with a mysterious figure who called

herself Aurra Sing. Realizing that the crystals would draw the attention of Jedi or other Force-users, Aurra Sing took on the contract knowing that someone would come looking for them.

The Aqualish Spy found a buyer, who arranged to meet him in the endless dunes of the desert. But the "buyer" is really the two Dark Side Acolytes, who have no intention of paying for the crystals.

The meeting takes place around the gaping maw of the dreaded Sarlacc. The Acolytes bring along their own group of scum, but are caught off guard by the presence of the killer Aurra Sing. A terrible battle erupts, with the hungry Sarlacc waiting to devour anyone that wanders too close to its toothy maw.

### **The Starfighter Trap**

The palace always seemed to fall into a slumber when Queen Ami-dala was away. Most of the government officials and administrators stayed tucked away in their offices, hoping to get as much datawork off their desks as possible during these quiet times.

The Royal Naboo Security Force administrative offices were almost completely deserted, the Security Officers using the Queen's absence to work on overdue offworld projects or tend to personal business and family responsibilities. Only Essara Till, flight instructor and member of Naboo's elite Bravo Flight, was working at her desk.

For Essara, times like this provided the perfect opportunity to review applications to join Naboo's Starfighter Corps, review maintenance logs and expense reports, and to clear even less agreeable datawork off her desk and the desk of her immediate superior, Bravo Flight's leader and Queen Amidala's personal pilot, Ric Olie.

The only sound coming from beyond her office all morning was the distant buzz of the young on-call pilots of Echo Flight conversing in their ready room, so the echo of approaching footfalls broke her concentration. When she realized the sounds were approaching her office, she straightened up and realized how sore her neck was. A glance at the chronometer on the wall told her she'd been hunched over her desk for three solid hours.

The lanky frame of Essara's wingman, Dren Melne, appeared in the office doorway. "Hi, sweetheart." he said.

"That's Flight Leader Sweetheart," she replied with a grin. "With Olie offworld, I'm top veermok. Don't you forget it."

"A top veermok who spends most of her time doing secretarial duties or playing nursemaid," Dren said as he approached her desk.

"We all serve Naboo in different ways," Essara told him, leaning back in her chair and stretching. "How are the troops?"

"Echo Elight is eagerly studying up on their fighters, hoping that we'll lead them to glory and a chance to fly the N-is." He looked down at her with a slight frown. "Ric really shouldn't waste your talents like this. It's foolish to make his best pilot handle datawork and babysit. Don't tell me you aren't bored stiff."

"If it weren't me doing the expense reports, it would be Ric," she replied.

"Better him than you. You're one of the best pilots in Bravo Flight."

"Y<sup>®</sup>ur bias is showing." She reached up and gently touched his cheek, smiling as she looked into his eyes. Like her, Dren had spent several years away from Naboo working as a fighter pilot. The two of them had never crossed paths offworld, but when they met after his return to Naboo a little over a year ago, their common experience had fostered an unexpected friendship. In recent months, that friendship had become something more. "Like I told you, Ric doesn't make me do this. I asked to do this. Plus, this way, you and I get to spend some quiet time together."

He took her hand and kissed it. "Maybe. On the other hand, there's a way we can have both."

"Why don't I finish this report, and then we can rent a couple of aircars and head into the mountains for a picnic?"

"I was thinking of something more permanent," he replied. "Remember the governor of the Agamar system and the fighter contingent he's trying to assemble?"

Essara's smile faded. She drew her hand back. "Yes. I told you, I'm not interested."

Dren rolled his eyes and reached for the silver starfighter model on her desk. "Essara, come on] You're wasted here! On Agamar..."

"I'm not interested in mercenary work." she interrupted. "Not any more. I'm on Naboo to stay, and if that means datawork and leading Echo training missions, I can live with that. I've retired from that life, and I like it this way."

"Don't get mad." He put the model down and reached for her hand, but she withdrew it and picked up a datapad. He sighed softly. "Promise me you'll give it some thought?"

Essara leaned back in her chair and threw an exasperated look at the ceiling. "What is it with you and Agamar?]" she exclaimed, fixing her eyes on his again. "It's not like you have fr..."

An alarm blared, filling the office. "All pilots to the briefing room. This is a Class One Emergency." a voice echoed. "I repeat, all pilots to the briefing room."

Essara snapped to her feet. "Get your gear. I'll see you in the briefing room."

"Think about Agamar." Dren said as he turned and ran from the room.

Essara shook her head, scowling with irritation at Dren, the pain in her neck, and the interruption. She opened the locker in the far corner of the office. Her orange flight jacket hung below her helmet and her holstered sidearm with the belt curled around it. She grabbed her gear, pausing briefly to look at the empty hook with Olie's name above it. "I'm happy doing the datawork." she muttered, putting on her helmet.

As Essara and Dren entered the pilots' briefing room, a Royal Security Officer activated the holopod at the front of the chamber. To Essara's surprise, Sio Bibble, the Governor of Naboo and the head of the Royal Advisory Council, was standing a few paces behind the Security Officer, looking impatient.

"Governor Bibble." Essara said, saluting. "This is not a drill, then?"

"No." Bibble replied. His brow furrowed. "This could be a grave situation indeed."

Echo Flight's pilots began to pour into the room with a din of excited conversation and a clatter of equipment. "Echo Flight present and accounted for," Dren said, bringing up the rear.

"The remains of Bravo Flight reporting for duty," Essara said, offering the governor another salute. "Lieutenant Melne and I will command Echo Flight today."

"Fourteen minutes ago, we received a distress call from Station TFP-9," the Security Officer said. The holopod projected a flickering three-dimensional image of the space station at the edge of the Naboo system. It was roughly egg-shaped with a series of docking arrays and refueling ports along its wider extremis.

A Corellian freighter was docked at each of two of the refueling ports. As the image rotated, Essara could see the elongated profile of a Sullustan-designed capital ship. "The station is under attack by a Hornet-class carrier and a squadron of Z-95 Headhunters."

A buzz of conversation erupted among the Echo pilots. Their voices held a mixture of excitement and fear.

"Quiet!" Essara said. The voices fell silent, and all eyes fixed on the image of the station.

"TFP-9, is almost defenseless," the Security Officer continued, offering Essara a slight nod. "Station engineers are still upgrading their point defense weapons systems, so its only defenses are its shields and a pair of stock YT-1250 freighters. I'm sure you can see these are no match for Headhunters. Echo Flight will launch immediately and defend the station. Bravo Flight will lead the mission. Once the raiders have been chased off, a portion of Echo Flight chosen by Flight Leader Till will remain at TFP-o, until their defenses are back online. Questions?"

"Yes, sir," said Echo Five, a young man named Rhys who had just recently joined the team. 'A TaggeCo Purchasing Agent in Keren once bragged he could buy the

whole Naboo system with his personal expense account. Why don't we just get him to pay off these pirates?"

"Stow it, soldier!" Essara snapped. She noticed Dren give the Echo Five a wink and a nudge with his elbow.

"Sir, I have a question." Echo Eight said in a soft voice. She was a young girl, about sixteen years old, who barely filled her uniform.

The Security Officer nodded at her.

"What kind of Headhunters are those? Standard Z-a,5s or AF-series?"

The Security Officer looked momentarily perplexed and glanced at Bravo Flight leader, who was standing next to him.

"The sensors on the TFP refueling platform aren't fine enough to distinguish between the different types of Headhunters," Essara said. "Pirates are more likely to have Mark Is, though."

"Yes, of course." The Security Officer tried to sound authoritative, but his cheeks were turning red. "That's all the data we have."

"May the Force protect you and the good people of TFP-9" Governor Bibble stated.

"Echo Flight, to your fighters," Dren called. "Prepare to launch!"

"Yes, sir!" The pilots rushed from the room.

Essara followed her pilots down the dimly lit tunnel to the palace hangar, reminding herself to make sure every Security Officer was supplied with the latest technical data on the current generation of Headhunters.

Essara understood why Dren and other "professionals" who had returned home sometimes got frustrated with the Royal Naboo Security Force. Everyone in the Royal Naboo Defense Force was dedicated to Naboo, but most of them lacked the combat experience and mercenary connections that Essara and a handful of others possessed. It was not uncommon for the ignorant to lead the inexperienced in the Naboo's volunteer defense force, but that situation would

only change if more seasoned soldiers would impart their experience to the rest. They were living in dangerous times, yet few on Naboo bothered to take notice. Had she ever voiced that sentiment to Dren? Maybe that was the argument that would make him see things her way. Of late, their conversations turned into arguments over whether it was worthwhile for dedicated soldiers to serve in the Royal Naboo Security Force. Dren was clearly unhappy on Naboo, and in darker, quieter moments, Essara wondered if she would have to choose between him and the world she loved.

We'll go on that picnic when this mission's over, she promised herself as she entered the hangar. I'll explain how vital we are to Naboo, how much she needs us. I won't lose my temper, I swear.

Most of Echo Flight were already in their fighters, and the astromech droids were moving the ships into take-off positions. Dren's and Essara's fighters stood out among them, the gleaming chromium and yellow hull plating contrasting the blue Echo Flight fighters. Essara vaulted into the cockpit of her fighter. She plugged her helmet into the comm system. The Rz unit slid the canopy shut and issued the familiar "all systems go" series of beeps and whistles. She double-checked the status indicators. The R2 model was a vast improvement over other astromech droids she had worked with, but she still felt compelled to make sure the droid wasn't overlooking something. All flight systems appeared ready, so she surrendered control of her fighter to Launch Control and double-checked the power allocations of her weapons systems and shields.

I know what I'm doing, Flight Leader, scrolled across the astromech droid interface screen.

"I know, I know," Essara replied on the internal comlink. She checked the droid's identity. They had given her R2-L1 again, a droid she'd nicknamed "Ell-one." There was a persistent glitch in its personality subroutines that made the unit atypically arrogant and self-assured. "It's a habit."

Understandable. It's a habit you should break. It makes you less efficient

"Bravo Seven to Echo Flight," Essara said into her comlink, ignoring the rest of the droid's comments. "You know the drill. Launch Control will guide you to the combat zone and relinquish control to you when we're within sensor range of the enemy. Make sure your astromech droids have loaded your first proton torpedoes by the time we arrive, and double-check the power allotment to your

shields and laser cannons. We're going to need firepower and shields more than speed against those Headhunters. Assume Attack Pattern Zeta-Gamma One as soon as control is surrendered. Sound off, Echo and Bravo Flights."

As Launch Control taxied the fighters to the broad opening of the hangar bay, the pilots checked in one by one. Essara heard Dren's voice first, followed by the pilots of Echo Flight, some of whom sounded too young to drive a speeder, let alone fly a starfighter.

"This is going to be like sailing on Lake Paonga in midsummer, Flight Leader." Echo Five declared over the comlink. "Even if the raiders have Headhunters AF-3S, our ships can take them in a one-to-one match any day!"

"You think?" asked Echo One.

"I studied up on Headhunters after Essara told us the basics," Echo Five said confidently. "They're really far better suited as atmospheric defense craft, no matter what SubPro's marketing claims. We've got better shields, greater range on our weapons due to the superior stabilizing fields in our laser arrays, and better maneuverability and speed because our Nubian drives. This should be over quick."

"Don't be too confident," Essara broke in. "The starfighter is less than half of the equation. I spent one year in a Z-95 AF-3 prototype and two years in the real thing. If those pilots are any good, you pups are going to need everything your ships can give you."

"Maybe so, Flight Leader," Echo Five replied. "But wouldn't you say..."

"You're too chatty, Echo Five." Dren interjected. "Let's not give the bad guys any more warning than we have to. Maintain communications silence until Launch Control disengages the auto pilot."

"Sharp kid that Echo Five," Dren's voice came. A blinking light on Essara's instrument panel indicated he was using the short-range, tight-beam channel reserved for broadcasts between members of a starfighter element. "If he can fly as well as he talks, he'll have your job eventually."

She switched to the same channel. "Good. That way I can retire to a cottage in the mountains."



Dren laughed. "I can't see you there for long. You're like the rest of us pros. You've got rocket fuel in your blood."

You've got rocket fuel in your blood. That was a favorite cliché among starfighter pilots, a neat shorthand to explain their love for speed and danger beyond anything else in life. All of the trappings of a so-called normal life—family, money, and even love—were secondary or absent in the cockpit.

In her late teens, Essara had found Naboo's educational focus on the arts and philosophy tiresome. She had felt her talent for tactics and excellent reflexes were being wasted and even stifled. She had started refusing to take part in the weekly choral performances she'd been involved with since age nine, and eventually turned her back on Naboo entirely. On the eve of her nineteenth birthday, she had said goodbye to her parents and set out for the great unknown beyond her homeworld.

The first several years were a series of tremendous adventures, the entire galaxy seeming to unfold before her. Later, she discovered, with some dismay, that the stars she had tracked in the skies over her home hid chaos and ruthlessness unknown to the Naboo.

She strove to keep herself clean of the infectious sickness of self-centered greed that seemed to motivate most of the beings she dealt with off of Naboo, but in doing so, she must have thinned that rocket fuel in her veins.

Two years ago, she had been working under contract with the Garqi Agricultural Combine. She was protecting yet another convoy from raiders when she realized she was homesick and bored. As the battered pirate fighters scattered before her and her wingman, she felt the first sudden twinge of longing for Naboo's rolling hills, and she realized that starfighting had become routine—like afternoon meals. When did she begin to lose the thrill? She couldn't say, but it had vanished completely in that battle.

Essara worked out her contract and returned home to Naboo.

All the things that had caused her flee Naboo were suddenly more desirable. She was still amazed at how much pleasure she derived from riding a tusk-cat through the lowlands and camping under the stars on the shores of a brilliant blue lake. When old friends asked her to sing with them, she jumped at the

chance. Granted, her voice was no longer a finely tuned instrument, but she had not felt as much a part of something in over a decade.

When Ric Olie asked her to join Naboo's volunteer starfighter defense force, she jumped at the chance. She was quickly inducted into the elite Bravo Flight and used her vast offworld experience to provide better training for the young pilots of Echo and Delta Flight, the entry points into the Royal Space Fighter Corps. In her thirteen years as a fighter pilot for hire, she had never felt so vital and significant. Her homeworld needed her.

However, she longed for the day when Naboo wouldn't need her. Although her parents were respected and famous leaders on-world, Essara no longer felt she had anything to prove. She had already led a successful life apart from them. Even though she was just thirty-five, she felt ready to retire to a peaceful life in the mountains. But first she had to make sure the wide-eyed Naboo patriots that would be protecting her knew how dangerous the galaxy was outside their home system. She wouldn't be able to sleep at night knowing the skies were being guarded by some kid who might think he could reason with pirates and shipjackers. Dren chuckled at her when she mentioned retreating to a mountain cottage, but settling down seemed right. Maybe she was getting old. Maybe she had just finally grown up. Whatever the case, she was going to discuss it with him earnestly after this mission.

Essara's headset filled with beeps and whistles.

Enemy within sensor range , scrolled across her screen.

Essara made a quick check of the tactical display. Her control panel showed that enemy craft were turning from TFP-9, to engage her team. A single Corellian freighter floated immobile between the station and the enemy carrier, but there was no sign of the second freighter. Either the crew had successfully escaped or had already been killed by the raiders.

Echo Flight was more than capable of handling this engagement, and Essara was certain that the Naboo Police Cruisers would humble the Z-95's. Her scanner confirmed only that the enemy flew either basic Headhunters or Mark Us, neither of which was as maneuverable or fast as the N-1 or the Police Cruiser. The Z-a,5s lacked shields strong enough to deflect the yield of the Naboo proton torpedoes, although the AF-3 model's heavily reinforced canopy would probably

protect the enemy pilot. Conversely, it would take some very well placed shots or several Z-95's firing on a single Naboo starfighter to penetrate its shields.

The Naboo government and its shipyards invested as much time and money in the construction of a single starfighter as many other planetary governments invested in entire fighter squadrons. Both the Police Cruiser and the N-1s were dream fighters as far as Essara was concerned. Pilots who lacked experience were supported by astromech droids and superior sensor and targeting systems, while veterans such as she could avail themselves of the enhanced maneuverability provided by the finely calibrated engines.

With some annoyance, Essara found her thoughts drifting back to Dren. Not even the excitement generated by the N-1 was enough to keep him from looking to the stars and dreaming about mercenary life. Dren kept bringing up Agamar. What was Dren's obsession with that backwater corner of the Outer Rim? He had no family or friends there. The Agamar starfighters were flying scrap-heaps that couldn't match force with the slowest Headhunters, let alone the N-1's. Did he need money? Could it be that he was finding it hard to make ends meet? If so, Essara had seen no evidence of this.

Whenever Essara daydreamed about her cottage, Dren was right there with her. She also dreamed of a little girl-their child-playing with toy starfighters. If money was really at the root of his restlessness, that problem was easily solved. She had more than enough money for both of them, and she wasn't going to let something as silly as credits get between them. But she'd have to be careful about how she made that point. Fighter pilots, herself included, were stubborn and brimming with pride.

A message from her astromech scrolled across the translation interface readout.

Theed Flight Control is deactivating the autopilot in five... four... three... two... one. You now have complete control of your starfighter, Bravo Seven.

Essara rechecked the status indicators. All systems were green, and the astromech droid had already allocated power in the way she preferred-shields at 95%, laser cannons at 101%, and sublight propulsion at 104%.

"Glad you decided to do things my way, Ell-one," Essara said after muting her comlink. She and the droid had argued over power allocation before, during a particularly routine encounter that Essara could hardly remember.

It is ultimately your decision, Flight Leader.

Essara switched her comlink to wide broadcast. "Z-95 Headhunters, this is Flight Leader Essara Till of the Naboo Royal Space Fighter Corps. Deactivate your shields and return to your carrier, or you will be fired upon."

The station's shields are gone. The enemy fighters received your broadcast, but they aren't responding.

The astromech droid wasn't completely accurate in its estimation. The Z-95S1 response was silent, if not subtle: Turning away from the battered space station, they rolled, fell into formation, and accelerated toward the approaching Naboo starfighters. They weren't going to let this happen the easy way.

Essara switched her frequency back to the tight-beam channel she shared with Dren. "I want to take some of these low-lives alive. Try to disable rather than destroy a couple, and I'll do the same."

"What about Echo Flight?" he asked.

"Y<sup>®</sup>u and I can go at this with some finesse. I'm not sure they can pick their shots as well."

"I copy."

"Bravo Seven out." She switched to the frequency shared by all the Naboo starfighters and verified the Z-95S1 approach vector. "Echo Flight, this is Bravo Seven. Shields at full power. Go to attack speed. Engage targets at will. Let your astromechs worry about any damage to your starfighters and focus on flying and gunnery. Whatever happens, stay with your wingman, and keep the bad guys off each other's tails."

"Copy," replied Echo Five. The rest of Essara's pilots checked in as she watched the fourteen green blips that represented her team converge with the eighteen red blips that represented the Z-95s. She drew a slow deep breath as she eased her fighter's throttle forward. Switching to the frequency she shared with Dren, she said, "Ell-one, lock on the fighter closest to me."

Target acquired. He's returning the favor.

Dren matched her acceleration. Essara used her command readout to cycle through the telemetry on Echo Flight. They were all locking onto enemy fighters as well. So far, they were maintaining formation. Not bad for a bunch of rookies, she thought.

Quickly, she found herself staring down the boldest of the Z-95's. It was heading straight for her. The enemy starfighter opened fire, and the N-1 rocked slightly as the laser bolts impacted harmlessly on its shields.

Shields at 91 percent and recharging, Ell-one reported as Essara and her enemy streaked past one another. Essara put her fighter into a wingover barrel roll and put herself on her foe's tail with such ease that she found herself shaking her head. "Too simple," she said. "We've got slow-witted pilots in basic Headhunters, Dren. They aren't even armed with missiles. Echo Flight could do this without us."

Her tactical display was a kaleidoscope of green and red blips, and flashes of cannon fire ignited the black, starry sky.

The Z-95 pilot weaved side to side in a frantic but futile attempt to get Essara off his tail. She carefully targeted the cowlings that protected the Headhunter's primary power generator and squeezed the cannon's trigger. The Headhunter's shields survived the first volley, so she fired again. The other pilot started whipping back and forth, trying to shake her. "Sorry, friend. You're outgunned and outclassed."

Essara fired again. This time, her lasers sliced into the cowlings, cracking it open. Sparks trailed from the power generator within as the Headhunter's pilot threw his craft into a spinning dive in one final attempt to shake his pursuer. Essara fired again, and the exposed generator burst into shrapnel that spun away from the fighter. The now-disabled Z-95 entered a wild tumble.

"That one's going to be fun for the Space Rescue Corps." Dren commented with a chuckle.

Essara reduced her speed slightly to take a close look at the Headhunter as she flew past it. The fighter was a solid orange color with no heraldry or other visible identification marks.

The pilot's alive but unconscious, Ell-one informed her.

"Hey, Dren, any idea who these guys might be?"

"Echo Five to Flight Leader." Essara heard before Dren responded. She switched comm frequencies.

"Bravo Seven here. Go ahead Echo Five."

"We've got the bad guys on the run, Flight Leader. Seven kills with only Echo Three, Echo Eight, and Echo Eleven taking damage. The rest of the Headhunters are retreating toward the carrier. Should we pursue?"

"Hey!" replied Echo One, who had the shrill voice of a teenaged girl. "I'm supposed to give the status report]"

"They teamed up on me!" Echo Eight said. "How was I supposed to take three at once when Kammie couldn't hit even one?"

"I just got another one." Echo Seven broke in. "You were right, Rhys! This is a piece of cake! Let's get them!"

Essara scowled. "Echo One and Echo Two, fall into formation with Bravo Seven. I want the rest of you to prevent the other Z-a,5s from reaching that carrier. Stay out of range of its weapons, though. If any of them get away, so be it."

"What about us?" Echo One asked.

"We're going after the carrier. Ready proton torpedoes."

"Yahoo!" Echo Two cried. "A cap ship! This is great!"

Dren's N-i Starfighter dropped into formation next to hers. "Looks like Echo Five is going to have competition for your job." Dren said.

Essara nodded, smiling to herself. "This is not going to be easy, Echo One and Echo Two. Set your shields to maximum recharge, even if it means you have to reduce the recharge rate of your lasers. We're going to suffer heavy fire as we're going in. But keep your cool. Assume Attack Formation Zeta Nine."

Echo One and Echo Two joined her and Dren in formation. Together they swung toward the slim profile of the carrier. "We're going in at a 65-degree vector," she said. "That should limit the number of cannons they can bring to bear. Stay in formation."

Torpedoes ready.

Suddenly, another wave of blips appeared on Essara's tactical display: Sixteen additional Headhunters were coming in behind them, from the direction of Naboo.

"Flight Leader," Echo One said, "my tactical computer is malfunctioning. A new bunch of Headhunters just appeared out of nowhere."

"Mine too," Echo Two said.

"That's no malfunction," Echo Nine commented. "We've got more incoming fighters."

"I see them," said Echo Five. "Where did they come from? Headhunters don't have hyperdrives, do they?"

"Let them come to you, Echo Flight," Essara said. Then another ship appeared on her tactical readout. To her surprise, it was another Hornet-class carrier. Well, at least the mystery of the Headhunters was solved, she thought. She asked the astromech, "Where did that second carrier come from?"

It must be using baffled sublight drives and dampened power systems. Sensors didn't detect it until it raised its shields.

"What sort of petty space pirates have access to baffled drives?" Essara muttered, surprised by the astromech's analysis but realizing it was the only one that made sense.

Petty space pirates who aren't petty space pirates.

A gravelly voice rose from the dark silence of space. "Naboo fighters, this is Captain Sorran of the carrier Velumina. Power down your ships and permit yourselves to be tractorbeamed onto one of our carriers. No harm will come to you. All we want are your starfighters."

On the tight-beam link to Dren, Essara asked, "Who are they?"

"The Naboo don't take direction from à¥âã thieves and terrorists!" said Echo Five angrily.

"Captain Sorran, this is Bravo Elight Leader Essara Till. I suggest you recover your fighters and leave our territory at once. We will not be threatened."

More hostile vessels appeared on Essara's tactical readout: fifty small craft not even half the length of an N-1, launched by the first carrier. Her onboard computer did not recognize their configuration. "What did they just drop?"

Uncertain. The design does not match any configuration in my databanks.

Essara gasped as she watched the tiny ships accelerate. Within three seconds, they were traveling so fast that her scanners could not keep up with them. They blinked in and out of existence. To Dren, she said, "Have you ever seen anything so fast?"

Her droid, however, was the one who responded, Based on their rapid acceleration, I conclude they're piloted by droids. There isn't room for a biological pilot with such an engine configuration.

"Echo Elight," Essara said. "Those fighters are moving too fast to be effectively tracked. We'll need to rely on good old-fashioned gunnery skill to take them out."

"Surrender, Elight Leader," Sorran commanded. "You and your pilots cannot match skill with our special fighter element. Do you really think a starfighter is worth dying for?"

Essara felt her temper flaring. "Echo One, Echo Two, Bravo Eight. Attack Eormation Beta-Zero. We'll take the fast-moving bogies. Echo Three through Echo Six, you deal with the Headhunters. The rest of you focus on those new fighters. Keep them in your sights and off each other's tails. Don't rely on your instrumentation."



Then she heard Dren's voice. "Remember that opportunity on Agamar, I've been pressing you about? I didn't want to make you choose like this, but this is your last chance, because my term of employment starts now."

"Dren?" Essara looked to her left, just in time to see her wingman break formation, climbing sharply and spraying a barrage of laser fire. "Dren, what are you doing?"

"Flight Leader, we're under attack!" shouted a panicked Echo Two. "I don't know where..."

"It's Dren!" Echo One cried shrilly. "Dren's firing on us! What's happening?"

"He's taken out my shield generator] He..."

"What's happening over there, Flight Leader?" Echo Five asked.

"Focus on the Headhunters, Echo Five!" Essara snapped. "Let us worry about the situation here."

"Oh no!" Echo Eight cried. "Those new Headhunters are firing missiles at us!"

"Those are just concussion missiles," Echo Six said. "We can shoot those down, no problem. Our shields can even take one or two of them."

Essara banked left, watching the fast-moving fighters blipping in and out on her tactical display as her sensors attempted to keep up with them. Ten were heading for her and the two Echo fighters in her vicinity while the others were engaging the rest of Echo Flight. She tried to get a firing angle on Dren as he shot at Echo Two again.

Echo Two's right nacelle burst into a deadly bloom of debris and shrapnel, and the Police Cruiser went spinning out of control. Echo One reacted with admirable speed, cutting sharply down and to the left in an effort to avoid her damaged wingman, but it still wasn't fast enough. Echo Two's pilot shrieked as the dome of his cockpit slammed into the fuselage of Echo One, destroying its astromech droid.

"Kerl?" Echo One cried, swinging up and reentering Essara's field of vision on her right.

Dren arced around the careening Echo Two, swinging fore over aft and turning on his fighter's axis as he set an intercept course for Echo One. Essara maintained her pursuit, still trying to achieve that elusive firing angle.

Echo One continued to call for her wingman. "Kerl?! Kerl, come in! Are you okay?! Kerl?!"

"Dren!" Essara shouted over the tight-beam frequency. "What are you doing?"

"I didnt want to make either of us choose our loyalties like this." he replied. "And I dont want any more of these kids to die if it can be helped. Tell them to power down their starfighters, now."

Essara cycled through her command readouts until the telemetry from Dren's fighter came up. He had armed another pair of torpedoes and was locking his targeting scanner on Echo One. "Dren, please don't..."

"Essara!" Echo One screamed as she started wild evasive maneuvers. "Dren's locked onto me! Help me! Please, help me!"

"Listen to her," Dren said. "We dont belong here, Essara."

"What are you talking about?" Essara watched as Dren's target lock on Echo One was lost, reacquired, then lost again. Great flying, kid, she thought. Keep it up, and I'll commend you when this is all over.

"Can't you see that real soldiers like us shouldnt be wasted on a useless world like this one?"

"Dren, I think there might be something wrong with the atmosphere in your cockpit. You're talking crazy. Stop this before it's too late." Essara banked sharply and locked her lasers onto Dren's ship. Ell-one issued a series of alarmed trills, to which she shouted, "Override the blasted FoF protocols! Havent you been paying attention back there?"

The droid offered a contrite-sounding burble. When Essara fired her laser cannon, the droid did nothing to prevent it. Dren spun his fighter away from her line of fire. The blasts only grazed his shields, and he managed to keep Essara from dropping into the automatic kill-zone on his tail.

"You've seen the way some of them look at us," Dren said. "They need us to protect them from the perils of the galaxy, but most of them would rather see us far away from Naboo. I've found a place where we will be appreciated for our skill, not looked down on."

"Dren, you're not making any sense," Essara said. "When have the people in the Security Force not been treated as heroes? Stop attacking us. Help us deal with the real enemy."

Essara's astromech beeped urgently. Essara gritted her teeth and fought to gain a target lock on Dren. A pair of well-placed torpedoes should bring down his shields and disable his fighter without killing him.

Dren was playing with Echo One now, anticipating the young pilot's every move. "I realized some time ago that there's no place for me on Naboo. You know how they say you can never go home again? Well, I believe that now."

"Flight Leader, help! I can't keep doing this! I'm not good enough without the droid!"

"Oh no!" Echo Eight suddenly shouted. "Oh no!"

Echo Four let out a panicked cry.

Essara switched to the general frequency. "Echo Three, report."

"Echo Five! Get him off my tail!"

"Flight Leader," Echo One wailed. The girl was now sobbing. Dren had established a firm lock on her, but Essara had still not managed to maintain one on Dren. Essara knew was not going to save this girl.

The droid beeped again.

"If you're not going to be useful, shut up," she hissed at it. And what about Echo Flight? Based on what she was seeing on her tactical screen, Echo Flight was coping with Headhunters-the number of enemies had been cut in half. So what was causing such panic over there? Was she losing more than just Dren's victims? And where had those two mystery craft gotten to?

Essara's fighter was rocked by a sudden impact. A shower of sparks burst from the control panel as her command screen went black. The cockpit filled with the smell of overheating wires, and all her power system indicators were spiking into their red zones. Her shields were overloading, suggesting that she'd either been hit by an energy torpedo or a turbo-laser blast.

Three of the unclassified fighters have maneuvered behind us. I tried to tell you. Now, please pay attention before we are both damaged beyond repair.

Essara cursed. There were three blips on her tail. She had been so preoccupied with Dren that she hadn't noticed. Her fighter shuddered as it was struck again.

"Adjust the shields before we lose everything!" Essara cried.

"Drop the laser recharge rate to 60 percent. See if you can't get the power grid back to full efficiency."

If someone had been paying attention to me, we wouldn't be in this situation.

"I'm hit! I can't shake him]" Echo One shrieked hysterically.

"Listen to her," Dren said contemptuously. "She isn't cut out for this, not like you and me. Tell them to power down their ships, You do the same, no one will die, and I'll explain everything to you in detail."

"You're asking me to betray Naboo," Essara hissed, trying to shake those mysterious fighters. All she could do was bank left and right, shooting wildly at Dren. He easily evaded her fire.

"There's no winning this one, Essara. Stand down before it's too late." Dren continued to pursue Echo One. Even while dodging Essara's continued barrages of fire, he managed to remain on the less experienced pilot's tail.

Echo One continued to scream and wail. Other voices would occasionally cut in, but Essara couldn't make out what they were saying.

Dren launched his torpedoes and banked right.

"Ell-one, target Bravo Eight's torpedoes!" Essara yelled, letting Dren escape for now. The droid obeyed instantly, and flashing brackets appeared around the triangular icons on her screen that represented the missiles. She steadied her course, briefly letting the droid starfighter pummel her rear shields with its lasers. She pressed the trigger on her cannon and kept it down, holding her breath as the missiles and the brilliant arc of laser blasts crossed paths. One torpedo exploded harmlessly, but then her cannon stopped firing. She glanced at the power gauge. The laser was drained. The 60 percent recharge rate] I forgot about it]

Dren's second torpedo struck the Police Cruiser. The explosion spread across the energy barrier like colored water poured onto a stone. Then, a secondary explosion ripped through the fighter's hull as its shield generator overloaded. The remains of the shattered astromech unit were ejected through the loading hatch as the fighter's secondary systems started to malfunction.

"Cut all power, Echo One," Essara said. "Stop that cascade overload before it gets out of hand]"

Echo One's only response was a ragged sob, but the girl followed Essara's order. The blue glow of her ion engines winked out, and the Police Cruiser's icon turned into an outline on Essara's tactical display.

"Tap your maneuvering thrusters to stop that forward momentum," Essara said, swinging her fighter right to maintain her pursuit of Dren. "We'll get you out of there soon enough."

"Echo Ten to Flight Leader," a harried voice came. "Those tiny fighters are cutting us to ribbons."

"Echo Flight, ignore the rest of the Z-95's for now/" Essara said. "Take out those fast fighters."

"If you pups you want to live, power down like Echo One did/" Dren said.

"Says the guy who killed Echo Two]" Echo Eight's voice had an edge to it that hadn't been there before.

Echo Five chimed in. "What about Bravo Eight, Flight Leader?"

"Dren's mine, You have your orders," Essara replied. Switching to the tight-beam channel, she said, "Tell those droid ships to get off my tail and then you and I can settle this, one on one."

"I think not." Dren said. "You're a better dogfighter than I am. Surrender, now."

Shields at 100 percent. Resetting laser recharge to full. I've got a pair of torpedoes loaded. Locking onto Bravo Eight.

"All I need is a split second." Essara said.

Target acquired.

Essara pushed the launch button. Two torpedoes streaked toward Dren.

Dren cursed, and his voice was drowned out by a burst of overlapping signals as Echo Flight's pilots once again began talking over one another. Essara stole a quick glance at her command telemetry display and found that it was still offline. "Ell-one, can you fix my command monitor?"

She looked over her shoulder and, with perverse anticipation, watched the torpedoes streak toward Dren's ship. But then a stream of laser fire poured over her canopy and detonated both torpedoes. Another burst pelted her shields.

Shields at 69 percent and recharging, the droid said. Reducing laser recharge rate to 90 percent.

"How can such tiny fighters carry so much firepower and be so fast?"

If they are droid starfighters, the power that would normally be allocated to life support can go into weapons, and the space reserved for the pilot can be used for weapons or propulsion.

"Those fighters won't stop until all of Echo Flight is dead or disabled." Dren said once the urgent babble from Echo Flight subsided. Dren had confirmed Essara's worst fear. "Check your telemetry if you don't believe me."

"Just tell me why," Essara said as she threw her fighter into an upward corkscrew, hoping to lose her pursuers. She was in serious trouble if she didn't deal with them somehow. Droids never got tired or distracted. She needed to

focus all her wits and dismiss the confused, angry thoughts that tumbled through her mind regarding Dren. The anger that had consumed her was starting to give way to fear.

"My employer is dedicated to building a strong planetary defense force in the system he governs." Dren said. A cutting edge defense force. The Naboo starfighters are the cutting edge he's looking for. All the governor wants are two or three N-1s and a couple of Police Cruisers in working condition so his engineers can build their own version."

"All this just to steal some fighters?!"

"Not just fighters, N-1 fighters. These ships really are greater than the sum of their parts. I told my employer that even if he could convince the Nubians to trade with him, he still wouldn't be able to build fighters that even came close to the Naboo starfighter... unless he had some working ships to study. He thought I might be exaggerating the N-1's capabilities, so he wanted a demonstration. The second carrier launching its fighters was the sign that he liked what he saw."

"Two carriers to capture a pair of N-1s?"

Dren sighed. "No, but he wanted to have numbers so overwhelming that only an idiot would put up a fight."

"I guess I'm an idiot then." Essara said. The fear of the starfighters on her tail was being burned away by anger at herself and hatred for Dren. How could she have been so wrong? How could she have read him so obtuse? How could she have let him into her dreams? Another barrage struck her shields.

Shields at 75 percent and recharging. Laser cannon recharge rate at 85 percent.

"There's no running from them," Essara said. "Load torpedoes. Reduce laser recharge to 20 percent and redirect all power to the forward shields."

The droid squealed with alarm. Essara pushed her throttle to maximum and threw her fighter into an overhead loop.

The tiny fighters slowed as Essara performed a wing-over and put herself directly in one of their paths. Ell-one established a target lock for her. The tiny enemy fighters started to accelerate again, and the lock was again lost as they

reached speeds that were beyond the targeting sensor's ability to track them. Essara had expected this, however.

Torpedoes ready. Unable to reacquire target lock.

"I know."

The droid starfighter element jogged to the right. Essara matched the movement, holding the nose-to-nose approach with her chosen target.

We're going to collide!

"I know."

The droid starfighter fired its lasers. Essara held her course as Ell-one beeped urgently and her fighter rocked. Essara bit her lower lip, struggling to steady her nerves and to stick with her desperate plan. The droid star-fighter changed course again, attempting to avoid collision. She put herself in its path again. A collision alert chimed. She spotted a scratch on the fighter's left fin, and she could see the muzzles on both of its lasers glowing. She fired her torpedoes and banked sharply left. Her gamble paid off-the enemy didn't have time to avoid the torpedoes, and they impacted squarely on its fuselage.

Nice trick. One destroyed, two damaged. We can outrun them now. Our shields are at 45 percent and recharging.

Essara eased the throttle back to standard attack speed as fragments of the blasted droid starfighter scattered into space. She would have to get Ric to authorize a complete download of Ell-one's memory banks and scans so she could analyze the attack pattern of that tiny starfighter. She would hate to think of anyone facing one of them without being adequately prepared. But first, she was going to deal with Dren. "Locate Bravo Eight."

He's engaging the remaining Echo Flight ships.

Until that moment, she hadn't realized that the shouts of Echo Flight had completely died out. They had been calling, but now they were silent. Essara felt another chill, but then realized that her long-range communication system had shorted out. Her tactical display showed her that Echo Flight was still in the



fight, but how many and whom she couldn't tell because her telemetry display was still down.

"Start repairing the damaged systems," she told the astromech. "Blast!"

Another trio of droid fighters was coming in fast on her right. Essara threw the throttle forward and sent her fighter sharply into a tailspin. She caught a brief glimpse of TFP-o, and the distant glimmer of Echo Flight and the other tiny starfighters exchanging fire. Then she was spinning into the blackness of space.

Laser volleys streaked harmlessly past her, but her starfighter jerked with the impact of missiles and then shuddered under the impact of another shower of laser fire. Her astromech issued a series of trilling whistles. She didn't catch what the droid said before the translator shorted out, but her systems monitor told her what she needed to know anyway. She had just lost shields.

"Concentrate on getting the shields back online!" she shouted.

Essara twisted the fighter sharply to the right, then threw it into a partial barrel roll before changing directions into another sharp downward dive. Blaster bolts streaked by the cockpit.

The fighter creaked and groaned. Ell-one squealed in a panic.

"I know the engine housing is threatening to tear itself loose] Get those shields back up, and I'll stop testing the ship's tolerance limits!"

Essara continued to whip her fighter back and forth, drawing her breath in sharp intakes whenever she heard its stabilizers groan and whenever another warning light blinked to life on her instrument panel.

Without warning, her long-range communications were restored. "Get him off my tail]" she heard a Echo Four scream.

"Shields!" Essara snapped to the droid. "Get me shields!"

Ell-one beeped and hooted. Essara had no idea what it was saying, but it didn't sound polite.

Echo Four continued his desperate plea. "Someone, please-"

The transmission ended in a burst of static.

"Echo flight," Essara said, her voice clear and commanding. "This is Bravo Leader. Keep it together, people. Cover your wingman. We can win this. Who's still with me?"

"Echo Six here." a voice came. "Battered but still moving."

"Echo Two reporting," came a weak voice.

"Kerll" several pilots cried.

"I'm hurt bad, Elight Leader. And my fighter's in pieces."

"Hang on," Essara said. "We'll get you out of there."

"Echo One here, but my fighter's disabled and my astromech droid was taken out when Bravo Seven attacked us."

"Echo Eive here. I've taken a couple of hits, but the ship's holding together and my astromech's doing repairs. Bravo Eight just disabled Echo Eight and Echo Seven, Elight Leader. I dont know if Keela's still alive or not. Eleven and Twelve were both destroyed by one of those fast fighters, and I'm not sure about anyone else."

Three active fighters left. Echo Four, Nine, Ten, Eleven, and Twelve confirmed dead. The rest disabled, some of the pilots possibly dying. They had neither the numbers nor the skill to deal with the droid starfighters. If those Z-95S decided to rejoin the battle, they would be able to overwhelm the battered remains of Echo Flight.

The battle had turned into butchery. She had to stop it.

"Power down your ships, Echo Flight," she said. "We're surrendering."

"What?" Echo Five cried.

"I gave you an order!" Essara gritted her teeth as she barely managed to dodge another volley from the droid Starfighter on her tail. "There's nothing glorious about a pointless death. Power down your ships and surrender."

"Wise call, Essara," Dren said triumphantly.

But I'm taking you down, you treacherous grank, she thought.

Her astromech issues a series of familiar whoops and whistles. It was asking if it should initiate the shutdown sequence.

"No. I'm going to keep fighting until we get Bravo Eight/'

The droid offered an affirmative chirp. Her shields came back online. They were recharging. The power indicator was not as precise as the astromech droid, but she could tell they were at least at 50 percent strength.

She glanced at her tactical display. Her flight from the droid star-fighter had taken her in the direction of the first carrier. A desperate idea popped into her head. She banked sharply to the left.

"Arm torpedoes." she told the astromech droid. "We're taking on the carrier."

The droid issued a panicked flurry of sounds.

"You're going to help me avoid their defensive fire. If we're lucky, maybe a stray shot from the carrier will soften up the droid starfighters for us."

"Essara, what are you doing?" Dren asked.

The translation screen came on just in time for her to see Ell-one say, We can't get Dren if we're dead.

"And we're dead if we don't something about those droid starfighters." she snapped back.

The torpedoes loaded. Essara targeted the bump near the center of the carrier's bulk: its primary bridge. She took its captain and gunners by surprise, because their point defense weapons didn't start firing until four seconds after her Torpedoes had launched.

"Help me get as close to the carrier as possible, Ell-one," she said, diving the fighter sharply down toward the hull. She felt the astromech droid adjust the ship's attitude, starting to pull out of the dive a second before she was planning to.

The torpedoes passed through the flak and with the astromech droid's help, Essara wove safely through what seemed like the solid wall of superheated plasma bolts that rose from the carrier.

Once Essara was under the carrier's defensive barrage, the capital ship's matte-gray hull spread out before her like a vast desert. Its weapons spewed death like erupting volcanoes, but she flew too close for most of the weapons to target her.

The torpedoes impacted on the carrier as she started firing wildly across its hull. "Load another couple of torpedoes!"

Two droid starfighters are still pursuing. Another was taken out by friendly fire.

The astromech continued to beep and trill, but Essara didn't dare look at the translation screen long enough to get the rest. Even with Ell-one's assistance, she needed to concentrate on piloting. Flying this close to a capital ship, traveling at the speed she was going, was almost certain suicide even without a mechanized killer in pursuit.

A gun emplacement seemed to materialize directly in her path, its barrels swinging to fire at her. Essara's conscious mind had barely registered its presence, but she was already firing on instinct. The emplacement burst into hundreds of metal shards that ricocheted off her shields.

One droid got knocked out by the explosion. Carrier's shields at 44 percent. Our shields at 34 percent and holding.

The last droid on her tail fired, some of the bolts hitting her, others streaking off into space or impacting against the carrier's shields. The enemy fired again, and Essara's ship rocked from the impact. More stray shots burst against the carrier's shields.

Torpedoes ready for launch. Carrier's shields at 43 percent and recharging. Our shields are at 23 percent and holding. The droid...

"Keep the torps coming," Essara said as she banked right. She cycled her targeting computer. A communications array 200 meters away appeared as a possible target. Without hesitating, she launched the torpedoes.

The astromech droid shrieked as they were enveloped in the resulting explosion. A section of the transceiver dish bounced off Essara's canopy, leaving a groove in the transparasteel as wide as her hand. Essara struggled to keep her starfighter under control, and Ell-one shrieked again as Essara clipped the carrier's energy shield. Her shields threatened to overload again, and panels of system warning lights illuminated her cockpit. "...ll-®~¥!"

Redirecting power. The droid ship was damaged by the explosion, too. It's slowing.

The cockpit once again filled with the acrid smell of melting wires as targeting sensor blinked out. She cursed and hit the panel. It came back on.

Getting violent will not speed the repairs. Carrier's shields at 31 percent and recharging. Ours shields at 12 percent.

The carrier's hull was coming to an end, revealing the black gulf of space. Several guns were already swinging into position to target her as she zoomed away from the capital ship's surface. "Not just yet!" she whispered. "You're not going to get me just yet."

Torpedoes ready.

Her targeting scanner flickered, threatening to cut out along with life support, attitude control, and the astromech translation unit. She would have to trust in the astromech's ability to keep the fighter together.

She plunged over the edge of the carrier, whipping her fighter to the right and skimming along its narrower side. To her surprise, the guns here were firing not in her direction but away from her.

Then she saw the Police Cruiser, just as her collision alert system warned her of its presence. A pair of missiles streaked past her, and her fighter bucked from the resulting explosion as the missiles struck the droid starfighter.

"I couldn't follow that order, Flight Leader," she heard Echo Five say. "Not when you were taking on that monstrosity by yourself."

"Consider yourself reprimanded." Essara replied, targeting one of the carrier's shield generators and firing her torpedoes. They both found their mark.

Carrier's shields at 22 percent and recharging. Ours are at 12 percent and holding.

"I'm with you, Flight Leader," Echo Five said.

Echo Five and Essara fired their torpedoes as if their launchers were synchronized. Both fighters spun away from the carrier as explosions started to spread across its hull. The carrier's power plant overloaded, and the ship was consumed by the explosion. For an instant the carrier burned like a sun, and then as quickly the darkness consumed it.

"Fall in, Echo Five," Essara said. "We're going to take out

Bravo Eight."

"Disable him?"

Essara glanced at her tactical display. In the distance, the few surviving Headhunters were retreating to the remaining carrier. It appeared that Echo Six had also disobeyed her order to power down and was clumsily attempting to dogfight with Dren.

Something tugged at Essara's heart. Was Dren just another greedy monster who would sacrifice his comrades-in-arms for credits? Maybe there was something else going on, something he hadn't dared talk about. If they could take him alive and chase off that second carrier, maybe something could be salvaged out of this.

But then Echo Six vanished from her tactical display.

"Harlaan!" Echo Five exclaimed. "He killed Harlaan!"

Essara growled, all doubt consumed by seething anger. She pressed her fire button as soon as Ell-one established the lock.

Dren's voice came over the tight-beam channel. "How many more pilots are you willing to sacrifice? Believe me, Essara, I didn't want it to happen like this, and I don't want to see you blasted into space."

"The feeling's not mutual." Essara replied. She pressed the fire button again. All she got was an electronic squelch from her instrument panel.

The magazines are empty.

Essara watched as the betrayer throttled up to full power and fled toward the remaining carrier, Essara's torpedoes on his tail.

"Their blood is on both of our hands, Essara." he said. "Believe me, you've made a huge mistake today."

"I made my mistake months ago." she replied. "Now, I can only try to correct it."

"Flight Leader, those torpedoes you fired are catching up with him." Echo Five broke in.

He was right. As Essara watched her tactical readout, she saw Dren alter course to bring his laser cannons to bear against the torpedoes.

"We can cut him off before he reaches the carrier." Echo Five continued eagerly.

"Let's do it. Fall in." Essara closed with Echo Five until they were in a tight formation. Within moments, they were between Dren and the Velumina.

"Mr. Melne, I'm declaring this exercise a failure/" the voice of the Velumina's gravelly voiced captain came. "I'll convey your regrets to the governor."

"What?"

Several small explosions burst across the hull of the distant carrier. A swarm of blips appeared on Essara's flickering tactical display.

"Missiles incoming!" shouted Echo Five. "Hey! Only one is targeted at me.

Essara saw that only one missile was targeting her as well, yet the carrier had launched at least a dozen. "Where are the rest going?"

Dren, the astromech replied.

"We had a deal!" Dren shouted as he targeted and destroyed Essara's torpedoes.

"You promised us a minimum of two fighters. It seems you are unable to deliver even one." The carrier's ion engines flared to life as it started to move away.

"I can jump out of here under my own power!" he cried.

"They might trace you, Melne, or they might stop you before make the jump. It has been pleasure knowing you. Good bye."

Essara realized that she had to save Dren's life. "He's the only one who'll be able to explain what was really going on here."

She threw her fighter into a hard arc, bringing it about and spraying laser fire in front of her. She was now squarely in the path of the oncoming missiles. Four of the missiles exploded in bright flashes of energy.

Not enough, Essara thought. Four is not enough.

One of the missiles struck Essara's fighter hard. The shields failed, and her damaged instrument panel exploded in a shower of sparks and shrapnel. Blood gushed into her left eye from a gash on her forehead.

Dren's scream ended in a burst of static. Essara watched, flinching as Dren's fighter disintegrated under the impact of eight concussion missiles.

"They killed their own man?" Echo Five said, the shock evident in his voice. "Why?"



"That's why I came home," Essara said, feeling sick, both from the fumes in her cockpit and from the tugging in her heart. "I came home because the Naboo barely understand the meaning of the word 'betrayal.'"

"Governor Challep of Agamar is denying his people's involvement in the TFP-9 incident," Sio Bibble said. "We have nonetheless sent a request to our senatorial delegation that an investigation be launched."

Five days had passed since the battle at TFP-9. The grateful technicians on the space station recovered the damaged starfighters and provided medical care for the surviving pilots. Only five of Echo Flight's twelve pilots made it back to Naboo alive. A memorial service and planet-wide day of remembrance in their honor was being planned for those who perished. Although Ric Oli" had offered to perform the unpleasant duty of informing their families, Essara felt obligated to do it herself. It had been her mission, so it was her responsibility. She had just spoken to the last set of parents when Bibble summoned her and Ric to his office â® update them on the ongoing investigation.

"We have already confirmed that that Agamar has been purchasing new starfighters and other weapons technology..." Bibble continued, "including at least one hundred droid starfighters of Xi Char manufacture."

Ric said, "And according to Royal Starfighter Corps records, there have been at least three requests from Agamar to purchase N-1s or Police Cruisers. The Queen's Advisory Council declined all three times."

"Any links between the government of Agamar and Dren?"

"No sir, nothing that you wouldn't expect. Most mercenaries spend at least a few months in the service of Agamar. Even Essara here."

Bibble cocked his head in her direction.

"Early in my career offworld, sir," Essara said. "I don't know anything about the current state in the system/'

"We traced some credit transfers made from an account Dren had on Ord Mantell to an account he had in Selton," Bibble said. "One hundred thousand credits had recently been deposited in his Ord Mantell account, but we're having a hard time verifying where that money originated."

"And Ord Mantell isn't helping you much, are they?"

"No. The so-called 'authorities' there take pride in allowing 'discrete' transactions."

"What about Dren's relatives?" Ric asked.

"They had nothing useful to offer," Essara replied.

Essara had gone to see Dren's parents yesterday evening. She had met with three sets of devastated parents earlier that day, and as she piloted her aircar away from Theed, her face still stung from being slapped by a woman who would never be a grandmother thanks to Dren's treachery.

From a certain point of view, Dren had been right. Centuries ago, Naboo had been settled by colonists who wanted to preserve their cultured lifestyle. They had envisioned a society free of the barbarism they felt was spreading across the galaxy. Although the Naboo people at large were pacifists, Dren's parents seemed as reactionary and volatile as their early forebears. Essara's brief encounter with them had left her feeling ill.

"We knew he had been corrupted," his mother had said. "I am not surprised that he no longer felt any loyalty to his homeworld. We raised him properly, you can ask anyone here. But he wouldn't listen to us. He wanted to see the rest of the galaxy."

"We told him there was no coming home when he left," Dren's father had said. "We told him that when he returned wearing that hideous black flight suit and carrying a blaster! Can you believe he brought that weapon into our house? Not a hunting rifle, but a pistol. A weapon of war..."

They feared and despised the rest of the galaxy. Anyone who brought the galaxy's problems to Naboo was worse than a plague. Dren's parents didn't bother to hide the contempt they felt for Essara's uniform, eventually telling her that they believed the Royal Security Force invited strife and violence through its very existence. "Before Veruna, it was just a small palace guard. But then he decided he should involve Naboo in the filthy dealings of the rest of the galaxy, so now you people have starfighters and armored landspeeders. It's no wonder

you and your pilots were attacked. Weapons don't prevent violence. They cause it!"

When Dren's younger brother-a shaak wrangler-showed up, he ejected Essara from the home. The parents had looked on with pride as he chased her into the street, cursing her as a corrupting influence on their homeworld.

Essara grimaced. "Dren hadn't had much contact with them since he first left Naboo. As far as I could determine, he only visited them once since his return."

"Nothing but dead ends," Bibble said. "The Queen won't be happy to hear that."

"I don't suppose she will," Essara said, sagging slightly in her chair. "None of us want to see our people die for no reason."

"Hopefully, the Senate will choose to investigate." Ric said. "Is there anything else, sir?"

"Not at the moment. Thank you both for your assistance and service."

Ric Oli' and Essara Till walked back to their shared office. The administrative wing was buzzing with activity, something for which Essara was grateful. The silence from Echo Elight's ready room would have been too much for her to bear.

"Essara, are you sure you're all right?" Ric asked, closing the office door behind them.

"I've lost pilots before," she replied taking her seat behind her desk. She gingerly touched the healing wound on her forehead. "And this scratch is nothing, like I told the medics."

"I know, but..."

"No buts, Ric. We've got a lot of work to do." She started reviewing the datapads on her desk, checking one, then another. When she realized that Ric was standing in front of her desk, she looked up. "Yes?"

"We all appreciate your dedication, Essara, but... well, you and Dren were pretty close. No one would think less of you if you took some time for yourself."

"I'm fine," she said, focusing on the datapad. But those words alone weren't enough to discourage Ric. When she looked up, he was gazing at her with a familiar concerned look. "Do you see a dark side to our introspective culture?" she asked.

"What do you mean?"

"When I came home, it was as if I'd never left. I guess I'm lucky to have such supportive friends and family. It wasn't the same for Dren. Our world turned against him. His family reviled him. While I dreamt of a quiet life in the mountains, all he could see was fear and hatred. I thought Naboo was different, but in some ways it's not."

"Naboo is not like the rest of the galaxy," said Ric. "I think most of our differences are preferable to what you'll find offworld, but it's naZve to assume there aren't those among us who are, well, less decent than we'd like. Those people loomed large in Dren's worldview, but they are a minority."

"I just need to keep busy," she said.

He frowned at her, then nodded slowly. From the expression, Essara could tell he had the words "I'm really sorry about Dren" on his tongue. Thankfully, he could read her expression too and knew that it was better for both of them if it remained unspoken.

"Most people on Naboo understand that the Royal Security Force allows them to lead their peaceful lives. Veruna might have drawn Naboo into too many offworld affairs, but we would have had to expand the Security Force regardless. Times are changing, ^ou and I both know that. If we do our jobs right, the people won't have to worry about it, though."

Essara gave Ric's words a moment's thought before changing the subject. "Y®u need to fill a vacancy in Bravo Flight. Here are three pilots that I recommend highly." She took up the datapad and handed it to him. "They are the best Echo has to offer, even if they don't always follow orders."

Ric read the datapad. It contained the service records for Rhys Barrow, Keela Egast, and Evenyl Yob... Echo Five, Echo Eight, and Echo One.

## **Starfighter: The Royal Escort**

Some time before the Invasion of Naboo, Queen Amidala agreed with the Trade Federation to meet for negotiations in a remote region of space. As the Royal starship approached the Federation ship, three mercenary ships approached quickly.

*"Unidentified craft, power down or you will be fired upon."*

—Till to the mercenaries

The Trade Federation immediately battleship left for hyperspace, but the Naboo delegation was not as fast. Bravo pilots Essara Till and Rhys Dallows were sent to defend the Royal starship until it was ready for hyperspace. Till ordered Dallows to concentrate on the Daggers. After the first three starfighters, the mercenaries attacked in waves of Daggers, followed by waves of MorningStars. During the fighting, the Queen's starship took cover in a nearby asteroid belt.

*"It's too dangerous. The mercenaries are targeting us. It's up to you, Bravo Flight."*

—Ric Olié

Just as the Royal starship was ready to make the jump to hyperspace, a wing of Dianogas came through the asteroids blocking the ship's escape route. Dallows attacked the new starfighters, enabling the Royal starship to finally escape. After the Queen's escape, a MorningStar came up behind and fired upon Dallows. Till came around to shoot the MorningStar. At that point, the leader of the mercenaries chose to appear. He shot down Till and disabled Dallows in quick succession using his craft's missiles before leaving.

Rhys Dallows was later found by the Toydarian Reti as he was scavenging for parts. Together, the two found Essara's body in the remains of her starfighter. Reti took him to Vana Sage's base, who happened to be working a job for the Trade Federation at Eos at the time.

## **Starfighter: Secrets On Eos**

In 32 BBY, the Trade Federation hired a group of mercenaries to capture Queen Amidala of Naboo. With some help from the Federation, the group ambushed Amidala's starship, but the Queen ultimately escaped the trap. One mercenary sent a coded message to the Trade Federation give them the news. The Trade

Federation had contracted the mercenary Vana Sage to perform tests on *Scarab*-class droid starfighters near Eos.

*"A coded transmission? Intercept and play it, Mod-3."*

*"...at least 25 ships destroyed. We suffered considerable losses. The queen has returned to Naboo. We were unable to take out the rest of—"*

*"Jammed!"*

—Vana Sage

*"It is a pity you had to hear that message Vana Sage. Now we have no choice but to terminate your contract."*

*"What!"*

*"And as further terms section twenty-three E, paragraph 5, we reserve the right to terminate your employment with force."*

—A Trade Federation officer fires Vana Sage.

While performing the tests, Sage's droid, Mod-3 detected the coded message from the mercenary. Decoding it, Sage listened to a mercenary describe the recently failed attempt to kidnap Queen Amidala, until she was jammed by her Trade Federation supervisor. The Federation employee then sent numerous Hunter-Seeker droids after Sage and left the system. After managing to destroy all the droids, a wing of mercenary starfighters emerged from hyperspace.

After the fighting, Mod-3 scanned the wreckage and found a lone, damaged Hunter-Seeker droid heading toward Eos. Thinking the planet was uninhabited, Sage decided to follow the droid. Sage followed the droid to a large mining facility. Moments after Sage arrived at the complex, a shield was activated over the area, trapping her inside. Staying calm, Sage determined that destroying seven of the eight shield generators would bring down the shield. Evading more Hunter-Seeker droids and other defensive weapons, Vana was able to destroy the generators and flee the planet.

She arrived at her base before Rhys and Reti to find Nym was waiting for her there. He took back his bomber, *Havoc*, and locked up Sage. Reti and Rhys arrived and freed Vana. Sage and Dallows compared stories while making repairs to his N-1 starfighter.

### **Starfighter: Piracy Above Lok**

This battle began with a piracy operation in which a Trade Federation convoy was attacked by Nym in his *Havoc*. One Superfreighter was disabled and four other smaller freighters were destroyed, the rest managed to escape into hyperspace. When most of the *Scarab* fighters were mopped up the Trade

Federation had sent a Trade Federation Missile Frigate and two repair ships to try to reclaim the Superfreighter. However, all three ships were destroyed. The disabled freighter then released its cargo of droid starfighters; all of which were destroyed. When the rest of the resistance was eliminated the freighter plummeted toward Lok.

When the freighter made a crash-landing, a pirate freighter escorted by pirate speeder bikes at a very low altitude found the freighter and began unloading its cargo. However, the Trade Federation sent a strike force consisting of multiple AATs and *Scarab* fighters to try and secure the downed freighter. A Recovery Freighter was spotted as well indicating the Trade Federation's desire to recover the cargo. The recovery freighter was then destroyed. Two Trade Federation Dropships attempted to fly in at low altitude and land nearby the crash landing but were also destroyed before they could land. Nym then destroyed the AATs heading for the recovery operation. The pirate freighter successfully gathered the cargo, then went along a river nearby to head for a cave to avoid pursuit. Nym, along with the speeder bikes, escorted the freighter to the cave where it would then arrive at Nym's Base.

*"We're done here. Jenkins, blow the charges."*

—A resentful Nym orders the trap to be sprung

At nighttime a speeder bike on patrol crashed into a military convoy belonging to the Trade Federation and heading for the Lok Revenants stronghold. Nym provided cover for the bases primary defense, the Inferno Turret, destroying two dropships before they deployed any tanks. Ground control reported that all scouts accounted for, except Jenkins. Nym managed to provide cover for Jenkins so that he could reach the base safely and get into his *Freefall*. Nym was alerted to several waves of Trade Federation droid bombers that were heading for the Inferno Turret, Nym, knowing that the Inferno Turret would be their strongest defense option managed to destroy the bombers before any damage could be done. Nym also managed to destroy two more dropships before they could drop off any AMTs. Meanwhile, the base's defense perimeter was under heavy fire. Ground control, knew it would be impossible to hold them off even with the Inferno Turret so they began evacuation. Ground control launched three decoy freighters first to draw the Trade Federations attention. Nym managed to provide cover for all three of them while one of the pirate freighters took off. The other didn't due to an engine failure. Nym provided air support for the ground base defenses destroying multiple tanks. When the second freighter managed to lift off it was then attacked by bombers and fighters, and before

Nym could intervene, it was destroyed. Nym then checked if the charges for the base were set, after confirmation the base was timed to self-destruct he told ground control to set the timer and leave, during which one of two C-9979 landing craft landing in the center of the base was destroyed in the explosion.

Nym returned to Vana Sage's base with news that the Federation had taken his base on Lok. Rhys told him they were planning to attack the droid factory, and Nym agreed to join them.

*"Eos has a pretty tough defense system, so just getting into the atmosphere is going to be a challenge."*  
—Nym

Upon approaching Eos, Dallows and Reti moved to create an opening in the space defenses for Nym and Sage to attack the surface. The Trade Federation opened fire on the incoming craft with a cannon on the planet surface. The Federation also had droid starfighters and mines in orbit. Undaunted, Reti and Rhys charged in and destroyed a small freighter convoy that happened to be departing at the time. The two pilots then attacked satellites that were sending targeting data to the surface cannon. While this was occurring, the Trade Federation attempted to send a Superfreighter from the planet. Dallows spotted the freighter, however, and destroyed it. They then destroyed the rest of the four satellites, allowing Nym and Sage to reach the surface.

Nym reached the Trade Federation facilities while being covered by Sage. Taking advice from Sage's droid, the two attacked the landing pad first to prevent the assistance of enemy reinforcements. The platform's defensive turrets were destroyed first, followed the destruction of the actual platform. In this manner, the manufacturing plant, power station, and main factory were also demolished. The command center and planetary cannon were also bombed to ruin. Flying away from the devastation, Nym was told by Rhys of trouble on Naboo.

After losing their facilities at Eos, the Trade Federation moved most of their droid production to Geonosis.

### **Invasion Of Naboo**

(Galactic Battlegrounds: OOM-9 Campaign)

In 32 BBY the Galactic Republic Senate passed a legislation taxing trade routes, upsetting the galactic Trade Federation, who under orders from Sith Lord Darth



Sidious blockaded the small planet of Naboo in protest using a droid army. In the initial landing several of Naboo's major Transmitting cities were destroyed. Despite the early success for the Federation an interruption came when a Droid control program that had been placed under the command of droid OOM-14, was stolen by a group of soldiers from the city of Harte Secur, meaning a large number of Battle Droids were left useless. Viceroy Nute Gunray of the Trade Federation knew that the program could do incredible damage to his army if in the wrong hands, so he ordered his personal command droid OOM-9 to retrieve the program. A small strike force was airlifted to the deactivated camp along with a Neimoidian technician to attack the base and reactivate the program.

*"OOM-14 has allowed the Naboo to make off with a precious droid control program*

*We are jamming their communications, But we must retrieve the program from the stronghold of Harte Secur"*

—Nute Gunray

The strike force followed a path that led to the entrance of the Research Center where the program was being analyzed, encountering a small patrol on the way that was defeated with ease. The droids destroyed the base's gate and turrets and killed the Royal Guards positioned at the base with ease. The technician picked up the program and the strike force returned to OOM-14's camp by stealing two Naboo transport ships. The technician returned the program to the base's Command Center, reactivating the deactivated army. Nute Gunray then ordered OOM-9 to continue the battle by destroying Harte Secur in retaliation for stealing the program.

*"Droid control program recovered"*

—OOM-9

*"Your army is online. Destroy Harte Secur!"*

—Nute Gunray

*"Lord Sidious, we have retrieved the Droid control program and struck a mortal blow to the Naboo."*

—Nute Gunray to Darth Sidious

Nute Gunray was so impressed with OOM-9's leadership in the battle that he placed him in command of the invasion another major Naboo city, Spinnaker. Many of Harte Secur's civilians and military were taken prisoners after the battle, one of whom told the Trade Federation of the Gungans, an amphibious race on Naboo, who would become the target of the Trade Federation's attacks

following the capture of Theed, Naboo's capital city. Harte Secur became a Trade Federation base after the battle and Camp Six was set up nearby as a prison camp for fambaas, a native animal on Naboo which the Federation planned to skin and sell.

*"You are needed for the invasion of Spinnaker"*

—Viceroy Nute Gunray, transmitting a message to OOM-9 after the First Battle of Harte Secur

The **First Battle of Spinnaker** was an important event of the early Invasion of Naboo. Spinnaker was the last big city to fall before the capture of the Naboo capital. The Trade Federation battle droids' rapid occupation of Spinnaker left the capital city of Theed completely open for Trade Federation forces.

*"This is Captain Panaka. I am ordering all officers to clear the city at once. Do not engage the enemy except in self-defense. We don't want a war in our streets."*

—Captain Panaka orders an evacuation.

The Fall of Theed began immediately after OOM-9, head OOM command battle droid, captured other Naboo cities before attacking Theed. Among his forces were 342 Armored Assault Tanks and 33 troop carriers. The army struck in the morning, catching the citizens of Theed unaware. As the army approached Theed, Viceroy Nute Gunray encoded transmission 0455-HBE to Sidious, informing him of their eminent victory. The Droid Army had occupied the surrounding countryside and Queen Amidala had advised her military to stand down, although the Federation expected sporadic resistance. A signal jammer prevented the Federation from sending in transports and droid starfighters. OOM-9, in a Heavy Armored Assault Tank, personally led a battalion of elite units into Theed. His forces consisted of 8 AATs, 2 Heavy Energy Pummels, 3 Single Trooper Aerial Platforms, and 16 Heavy battle droids. They broke through the gates of Theed and advanced northeast toward the signal jammer which was located near the Theed Hangar complex, destroying two Naboo Fortresses and additional military buildings. The Royal Naboo Security Forces mustered Gian speeders and infantry forces against the Droid Army. The droid forces destroyed the signal jammer, and reinforcements arrived in the city along with OX9 labor droids. The two groups linked up and proceeded up the Main Boulevard to the Theed Royal Palace. The droid forces destroyed the gates blocking their path along with two additional Fortresses. When the droids occupied the palace grounds, more labor droids, along with five droid starfighters, arrived. The labor

droids were ordered to construct a Neimoidian Throne. After it was completed, a pleased Gunray congratulated OOM-9 for capturing Theed.

Queen Padmé Amidala, Captain Quarsh Panaka, and Theed Governor Sio Bibble were taken hostage. Many citizens from the city were rounded up into detention camps and the streets were sealed off except for patrolling Federation forces. The city was secured in a few hours. Inside the Hangar, the Naboo air traffic controllers were captured.

After arriving in the city with a Bongo by the Solleu River, both Jedi negotiators, Qui-Gon Jinn and Obi-Wan Kenobi, tried to gain entry to the Palace.

(Obi-Wan)

Once in Theed, Jinn told his Padawan that he would create a diversion while Kenobi found a way into the Palace, and cautioned his Padawan to avoid entanglements. Kenobi went up the stairs near the bongo and engaged several B1 battle droids. That way did not lead to the Palace, so he returned to the Solleu and swam to the other side. He then climbed onto the streets and dispatched the two battle droids in his way, and started toward the Palace. He fought through the battle droids stationed in the streets and rescued three hostages. He also sliced his lightsaber through the alarm systems, disabling them. At one point, he climbed up the balcony and picked up a sniper rifle to reduce the number of enemies in his way. He then moved forward across a bridge over the river. Down the street, a shield blocked one street, so he went through a door and climbed the stairs to the upper balcony. There he found another hostage; he rescued the man, who led the Jedi to a balcony to spy on more prisoners. Kenobi then moved past the nearby statue.

A droid starfighter destroyed the bridge to the Palace. Stuck on the wrong side, Kenobi met two Naboo soldiers and a grenadier. They helped him find another way around and told him about a secret entrance to the Palace. Kenobi went up the stairs to the next level and saved another hostage, who warned him about nearby battle droids. Moving along the cliff to the other side, the young Jedi faced more battle droids and one of the Federation's new assassin droid. He defeated all the droids. He then took over a gun turret to destroy a Single Trooper Aerial Platform. He then jumped across the ledges, went up the stairs, and shut off the water flow to the pool. That revealed the secret stairs for him to go down into.

During the Jedis' trek through the city, the central bridge across the river was blasted apart by an Armored Assault Tank, cutting the city off from other regions. Kenobi was separated from Jinn and Binks. The Jedi were forced to cross the city to find the Queen.

(The Phantom Menace)

Kenobi jumped into the river and swam away from the tank. He climbed onboard one of the islands a nearby plaza and went onto the walkway. He then Force pushed a lever to extend the walkway. Continuing onward, he then fought a group of battle droids. A force field generator blocked his path, but Kenobi used the Force to flick a switch and lowered the dam, shorting out the generator. Walking along the path and turning left, he found himself among a firefight with more droids and two Naboo guards. After a conversation with them, he told them he was going to enter the garden, and the soldier gave the Jedi a light repeating blaster. Two Multi-Troop Transports settled over the garden and disgorged droids. Kenobi met a wounded guard, who told Kenobi the passcode to enter the gates near the palace. Kenobi then moved forward, avoiding an Armored Assault Tank in the plaza and sneaking around a battle droids and a disabled Multi-Troop Transport. Kenobi gave the password to another Palace Guard. Once through the gates, the guard charged forward but was gunned down.

*"If you're going into the city alone, you're the one that needs help."*  
—A wounded Naboo guard to Kenobi

Kenobi then moved through the door and into the plaza. He found the button to open the door out of the gardens, then went through it. Off in a small alley rested a droid starfighter, which self-destructed as Kenobi approached. Returning to the path, the Jedi then drained several water pools to reveal the controls to the bridge to access the plaza near the palace. He also destroyed the droids near the controls.

Kenobi crossed the bridge and climbed the stairs at the end of the walkway, which had been mined, then neared the palace gates, where another Armored Assault Tank was stationed. The Jedi avoided the laser blasts long enough to Force push the lever to open the inner gates, then went back across the tank's path to throw the switch to open the inner gates, which was hidden behind a window. Kenobi then ran through the gates into the area near the palace.

(Jedi Power Battles)

During the battle, Kenobi rejoined Jinn. infiltrated Theed and fought through a city littered with more than 20 battle droids and OOM security battle droids to make it to the Royal Palace. They passed the Theed Royal Library, which had been turned into a war room for the Droid Army. Just past the library, they faced a gauntlet of missile launcher-armed droids on the balcony and six destroyer droids on the road. At one point, the Jedi commandeered an Armored Assault Tank after taking out its 3 pilot droids and used it to travel through Theed, blasting other tanks and droids. They also rescued seven handmaidens who had been captured. They disembarked from the tank near the Palace grounds. As they moved onto the palace grounds, they faced more battle droids. In front of the palace they destroyed a T4 turret droid along with Flame battle droids.

(Obi-Wan)

After entering the palace through the secret entrance, Kenobi found himself inside the palace kitchen, where he met the servant Asha. She told him the Palace was on lockdown, but she could crack the codes. Kenobi climbed up the fireplace to reach the next level and fought the droids in the dining room. He then hit the switch to raise the dining table up from the kitchen, which Asha rode up. She then sliced the doors for the Jedi, but held back as Kenobi fought off the battle and destroyer droids in the next room. Once all the droids were destroyed, Asha sliced the next door for him. In the next room, Kenobi was cut off by force fields. He destroyed the droids, including an assassin droid, and then shut down the force field for Asha. The codes had been changed, but she sliced the doors.

Through the next doors, the Jedi entered a firefight with Panaka and other Naboo soldiers. Asha was locked out by force fields. Together, Kenobi and the Naboo soldiers destroyed the attacking battle droids and the destroyer droid. Kenobi then unlocked the force fields, and went into the next room with a double staircase and fought more droids. Asha then unlocked the throne room. The group entered and fought three assassin droids, which burst through the windows. A Palace Guard informed them that the Queen had been taken to Camp Four to sign a treaty.

Kenobi contacted his Master and informed him of the situation. Jinn ordered Kenobi to meet back up. Traveling back outside of the palace, Kenobi met a Naboo grenadier, who informed the Jedi about an Armored Assault Tank

blocking the resistance. Kenobi jumped on the balcony and destroyed a grenade droid. He then took over a repeater cannon and destroyed two droids on a lower balcony which were manning more repeater cannons. Moving forward, the young Jedi disabled a force field blocking the street and then assisted several resistance members in fighting battle droids, then dropped an ion grenade on the tank, disabling it. The destruction of the tank cleared his way to the next street. Kenobi then deactivated the shield generator blocking his way, and stepped through.

Kenobi then entered a firefight with two more Naboo soldiers, a squad of battle droids, and an assassin droid. Kenobi dispatched the Federation troops before proceeding. Continuing, he defeated another assassin droid and rescued another hostage. He then met back up with Jinn, who was fighting two more assassin droids.

(Jedi Power Battles)

The two Jedi entered the palace and fought through more droids, including B1 grapple droids, destroyer droids, and OOM command battle droids. At one point they Force jumped on the outside of the walls, using the balconies to proceed to the next story. After that, they infiltrated the throne room with the help of one of the handmaidens they had rescued, who showed them a secret entrance.

Theed's officials were liberated by the two Jedi and Binks as OOM security battle droids attempted to bring them to Camp Four. Bibble and several handmaidens decided to stay while the Queen went to Coruscant to plead for help in the Galactic Senate.

(The Phantom Menace)

On their way to enter the passage under the Palace, Kenobi and the Queen were separated from Jinn, Panaka and the others. The Queen led Kenobi away from a group of charging battle droids and into a Palace corridor. She informed him about a secret passage through the garden, and they head that way. In the garden, Kenobi saves the Queen from a battle droid. He then pushed a statue out of the way so they can access the passage. They went up the stairs, with Kenobi dispatching another droid. The door to the passage was locked, so Kenobi Force-jumped across the broken balcony and accessed the door's control from the other side, and the two move out into the streets.

Kenobi went into an apartment and met a woman who was distraught after being separated from her son. Kenobi promised to rescue the son. The boy had hid from battle droids in a nearby building and Kenobi brought him back to his mother. The woman gave the Jedi a health pack in return. Kenobi also found a wounded Naboo guard nearby. In return for Kenobi fetching him water, the guard warned him about a nearby Armored Assault Tank. Kenobi then snuck around the balcony to flank the tank, and destroyed the battle droids in his way. The young Jedi then found a prisoner. After a brief dialogue, Kenobi freed the man, who gave the Jedi a thermal detonator.

Kenobi destroyed the droids under the archway, prompting the tank to leave its position. He then returned to the Queen and led her past the tank. In the next street, they were ambushed by droids, three of which were up on a balcony. Kenobi then met an astromech droid, but told it he didn't need a droid following him, and the droid remained. Moving along, the Queen and her Jedi protector duelled more battle droids on the way to the hangar. Kenobi then went into the apartment of another woman by accident. The woman told him that the gate was locked. Kenobi then leapt onto the balcony, then crossed over the street on an overhanging vine, and opened the gate. During the battle, Kenobi had acquired a blaster, and he used it to destroy three mines on the street to allow the Queen to proceed to the river; he also destroyed more droids. Kenobi then met a fisherman, and used his boat as a stepping stone to the street. Once there, he Force-pushed a lever to lower the bridge for the Queen to pass over the river. Once across, the two were ambushed by more droids. Further down the street they faced a heavy repeating cannon. Past that, they joined a firefight with more Palace guards and faced several more groups of battle droids, along with a destroyer droid. The Queen and Kenobi then rejoined Jinn and the others in the Hangar.

At the time, the Hangar was occupied by droids. Jinn approached an OOM command battle droid and tried to talk his way past it. When the droid ordered their arrest, Jinn pulled his lightsaber and disabled it, then turned on other droids, including 3B3-1204; meanwhile Kenobi rescued several Naboo pilots who were under guard. In the ensuing firefight, one of the Palace Guards was killed. With the droid threat gone, the Queen, Panaka, her handmaidens, and the two Jedi were able to flee aboard the Royal Naboo Starship and depart from Naboo. Governor Bibble stayed behind to watch over the people of Naboo. Before they fled, Captain Panaka ordered an evacuation of the surviving security officers. Ric Olié piloted the ship out of the atmosphere before facing the Federation blockade. One of the blockade battleships fired on the Royal Starship, disabling

its shields. Astromech droids were sent to repair the damage, but several were destroyed before R2-D2 fixed the shields as the starship flew past the blockade and entered hyperspace. With the hyperdrive motivator damaged, Jinn convinced the Queen to divert to Tatooine for repairs.

### (Battle For Naboo)

The members of Bravo Squadron heeded Panaka's evacuation order and fled the city. Lieutenant Gavyn Sykes fought his way through a number of droid forces, rescuing a number of captured civilians in the process, before receiving a transmission from Captain Kael, who was pinned down near the Royal Naboo Security Forces headquarters. Sykes destroyed the destroyer droids attacking Kael. Together, they destroyed or went around other battle droids and Armored Assault Tanks. Kael ordered Sykes to follow him as they moved through the plaza to escape into the swamps. Along the way, Sykes picked up a vehicular upgrade. They then arrived at a hangar protected by two tanks. Kael ordered Sykes to destroy them, and the captain realized the tanks were protecting STAP-2s. The two stole the speeders and escaped into the countryside.

*"Hurry up! They're attacking the farmhouses."*

—Captain Kael, to Lieutenant Gavyn Sykes

As Kael and Sykes moved away from Theed, several enemy battle droids flying STAPs began chasing Kael, who ordered Sykes to take them out. Noticing several more enemy STAPs attacking Naboo farms, the two officers engaged the droid forces, rescuing a number of local civilians in the process. Sweeping through the rest of the countryside, Kael and Sykes destroyed more battle droids until reaching a large cluster of houses. The Federation was intent on wiping out the Naboo farmers in the area, but Sykes engaged and destroyed several waves of STAPs. With more droids inbound, the two subsequently fought their way down the road. A Federation Armored Assault Tank blocked their path across a bridge, but Sykes destroyed it using his speeder's laser cannons; he also shot down a Vulture droid starfighter flying overhead. The two crossed the bridge, entered a security hangar, and commandeered a pair of N-X Police Cruisers. Kael told Sykes of a trading village in the nearby swamps that could offer them assistance in their struggle against the Federation Army. Taking off, they flew into the swamplands, just before a large Federation force reached the swamps.

*"Permission to engage, Captain?"*

*"Permission granted. Just make sure you cover those houseboats."*



—Lieutenant Gavyn Skyes to Captain Kael, flying over the village

The Federation forces demanded the surrender of the trading village and opened fire when the villagers refused. The massacre was already underway when Kael and Sykes reached the swamps to locate the village. Upon finding it, the leader of the village, Rohan Wayside, contacted them and informed them of the situation. As the flight leader, Kael granted Sykes permission to engage the droid forces, and the two worked together to save several houseboats from destruction. Wayside then asked them to rescue his best pilot, Vedd Deviss, who was currently stuck on the far side of the village. The two soldiers flew on to find Deviss, destroying more droid starfighters and gunboats with the weapons on their police cruisers. At the end of the village, they engaged droid bombers, which were in the process of leveling the area. The remaining droids fled when Kael and Sykes took the bombers down.

After Kael and Sykes shot down the bombers, Wayside offered his assistance. Kael responded by telling him of their need of pilots to fly against the Trade Federation forces. Wayside sent Deviss to lead them into the northern mountains to search for a smuggler, Borvo the Hutt, who could help them strike back at the Trade Federation Droid Army.

As the three pilots approached the mountains, they picked up a ship, which, according to Deviss, belonged to their "smuggling friend." Kael advised his wingmates to stay alert just before a patrol of droid starfighters damaged Sykes' N-X Police Cruiser. Due to the damage, Sykes switched to a landspeeder acquired from a nearby hangar. Kael and Deviss went to search for the smuggler on the north trail while Sykes went east. Sykes came across a civilian homestead under attack by Single Trooper Aerial Platforms and destroyed the droids, saving the homestead's owner. The owner gratefully gave Sykes technology to upgrade his vehicle.

*"Great work, Officer. Follow me, I have something to show you."*

—The homestead owner, to Gavyn Sykes

Sykes then continued his search for the smuggler. Kael ordered him to ignore several houses under attack by the Federation, as there were too many battle droid squads there. Traveling past the houses, Sykes found the smuggler's ship in a canyon pinned down by Armored Assault Tanks. He contacted the ship and offered his assistance. Scouting ahead, Sykes escorted the ship through the canyon, destroying many tanks firing at the freighter along the way.<sup>[1]</sup>

Upon reaching a safe distance from the tanks, Borvo thanked Sykes for the assistance and offered his support, and the Naboo pilots agreed to travel with him. Sykes found another police cruiser in a hangar and took to the skies while Deviss landed and supported the group from the ground. Though Sykes was worried they might be heading into a trap, Kael assured him it was worth the risk. When they reached the Hutt's base, the N-1 assembly site, they discovered that the Trade Federation was already there and planned to wipe out the base. Although the Federation had planted mines in the area, the pilots successfully escorted Borvo's ship to the base, destroying several laser turrets on the way. First, however, the ship had to stop at a staging area and allow Kol Kotha, one of Borvo's pilots, the chance to join the fight in his starfighter. Kotha then picked up a Federation transmission, letting them know that droid reinforcements were inbound. The pilots performed several strafing runs against the droids and destroyed the tanks before the base was wiped out.

*"Mission accomplished! The N-1 assembly site is now under our control."*  
—Captain Kael, to his pilots, after the defeat of the Trade Federation

After Borvo was escorted to the site of his organization's base, the Hutt gave the pilots new starfighters and vital intelligence with which they used to go back on the offensive against the Trade Federation.

*"I've found one of the slave satellites, sir. And a minefield!"*  
—Lieutenant Sykes, to Captain Kael

The three Naboo pilots and two of Borvo's pilots flew into orbit where Comm 4 was located. Once they were near, their sensors noticed Comm 4 had heavy shields, but the pilots took pot shots at the satellite regardless. One of Borvo's pilots, Kol Kotha, suggested the shields were created by three nearby slave satellites, and Kael ordered them to find and destroy the projectors. Sykes flew toward the first one and discovered the minefield protecting it. Sykes and the other pilots fought through many droid starfighters and mines to knock out the generators one-by-one and expose Comm 4. After the second projector was destroyed, another of Borvo's pilots, Adela Tyché, who had stayed by the satellite, radioed to say that her shots were starting to affect the shields. Once the shields were down, the pilots moved to attack Comm 4, which still had six missile defense turrets. A squadron of droid starfighters also arrived to defend the satellite. Avoiding the missiles and starfighters, the resistance pilots pressed the attack against the satellite and destroyed it, shutting down the control signal to a Federation base down on the planet.

*"Good work, people. We just put a Trade Federation base to sleep."*  
—Captain Kael, to his team

After knocking out the satellite and forcing the base to hibernate, the five fighter pilots, flying N-1 starfighters and another type of ship, dashed down to destroy the base itself. Kael ordered them to destroy all Federation targets.

*"Destroy anything and everything that belongs to the Trade Federation."*  
—Captain Kael, to his pilots, at the start of the attack

Approaching the canyon in which the base's multiple platforms were situated, the pilots destroyed several inactive laser turrets. They were blocked from further travel, however, by a wall of airborne proximity mines. As they were attempting to disable the first three platforms of the base, the base reactivated much sooner than expected, and the turrets opened fire on the Resistance fighters. The pilots destroyed the turrets and the mines, and proceeded into the next section of the base.

*"We have visitors."*  
—Vedd Deviss, in reference to droid starfighter reinforcements

The pilots found and destroyed another gun platform before moving on to destroy a platform supporting a building. The building was protected by two laser cannons in the water and a nearby missile launcher. When the area was cleared of Federation forces, Kael ordered his pilots to rejoin formation. As he led them toward the next part of the canyon, they were met by Vulture droid starfighters, about which Naboo pilot Vedd Deviss informed his compatriots. A C-9979 landing craft took off from the base at the same time.<sup>[1]</sup>

The Naboo coalition engaged the droid starfighters as they continued on to the next section of the base. There they found buildings protected by turrets, which they cleared as well. Moving along the canyon, they destroyed the next platform, which was protected by *Ostracoda*-class gunboats in addition to laser turrets. Kael ordered his team to move on once the Federation presence in the area was annihilated.

Naboo Lieutenant Gavyn Sykes then flew off the path and acquired advanced proton bomb technology in a burned-out building after clearing away the surrounding Federation defenses. As Sykes rejoined the formation, which was flying over a destroyed dome with Federation turrets nearby, the mercenary pilot Adela Tyché commented that the Trade Federation had been there already.

*"Good job, form up."*  
—Captain Kael, to his pilots, after destroying a platform

*"Sykes, you've just been drafted into the Trade Federation."*

—Captain Kael orders Gavyn Sykes to steal a gunboat

Flying through the next part of the canyon, the Naboo pilots reached the base control center, where they planned to steal a Federation gunboat. The command center was protected by a deflector shield, which Sykes had to disable to steal the gunboat while Tyché provided supporting fire. Once the defenses were destroyed, Sykes landed his N-1 starfighter and absconded with a gunboat, shooting through a wall that blocked his path to the Andrevea River. The other fighters were unable to escort him, as Federation reinforcements were inbound. Kael ordered Sykes to continue, as the Captain surmised the Federation would think Sykes was an escaping Neimoidian.

*"Captain Kael, I've found the mining camp. The Trade Federation is using captured Naboo as slaves."*

*"Do as much damage as you can and free the prisoners."*

—Sykes and Kael, as Sykes moves down the Andrevea River

Traveling along the Andrevea River in the stolen gunboat, Lieutenant Gavyn Sykes infiltrated the slave camps at night. He reported to his flight lead, Captain Kael, who told Sykes to continue upriver and scout for Federation forces. The droid forces had blocked the river with proximity mines, but Sykes was able to clear his way through. Several droid starfighters flew overhead, however, and Sykes panicked. His flight leader managed to calm him down, warning him not to betray the mission. Sykes then arrived in a large bay area, where some of the camps were located, and Kael ordered him to free the prisoners. Since Sykes was in a Trade Federation gunboat, the forces stationed there believed him to be an ally. Two minelayers attempted to block the entrance with more proximity mines, but Sykes shot them down and revealed himself. Laser turrets opened fire on the gunboat, but Sykes destroyed the power generators, shutting off the lasers and allowing the civilians to escape. That also prevented the first set of camps from sending out a warning to the other camps. Kael contacted Sykes and notified him that their smuggler ally Borvo the Hutt was sending transports from his smuggling organization to evacuate the civilians in the area.

As Sykes traveled further down the river, he saw another gunboat racing away to warn the rest of the camps. Sykes caught up to it and sank it, keeping his true identity hidden from the remaining Federation forces. He had to destroy more mines on the way to the central concourse, though he had no difficulties in passing through the gates of the concourse until he sneaked up to the anti-air defenses. The defensive posts were alerted to his presence when Sykes opened fire on them. As he fought through the turrets, more gunboats were launched

from the camp's hangar, and he also had to take out the anti-air turrets so that his wingmate Vedd Deviss could arrive and destroy the generators. After Sykes destroyed the turrets with his gunboat's weapons, Deviss flew low in a strafing run in his N-1 starfighter to knock out the generators. The prisoners had been freed, but the resistance did not have enough transports to take them away, so the civilians found several houseboats in which to travel, and Sykes escorted them further up the river to where they could meet back up with Kael and the rest of the group.

*"Okay, I'll get this convoy to the ruins. Let's move."*

—Lieutenant Gavyn Sykes, leading a convoy of rescued prisoners

As dawn broke, Sykes and the civilians approached the end of the river near the town Ferentina, which was under attack by Trade Federation droid bombers. A bomber knocked out a bridge crossing over the river, trapping the convoy behind the bridge. The Armored Assault Tanks stationed along the banks of the river subsequently opened fire on the transports. Sykes, knowing that his group had to take to the land, got to a water-based security hangar and took to the skies in an N-X Police Cruiser. He destroyed the tanks and then knocked out a tunnel through which additional tanks had been traveling to join the battle. As the civilians were loaded into Flash speeders, Sykes flew over the town to provide support, and he rescued two more crewed Flash speeders that were stuck behind a fallen tower. Sykes then advanced into the canyon ahead of the speeders, destroyed a blockade of five tanks, and defended the convoy from many droid starfighters, successfully escorting the convoy northward to an old hiding place in a mountain pass near Devils tower, an ancient landmark.

*"Where's Captain Kael?"*

*"I'm not sure. I was separated from the Hutt's transports, but I think he went down. I'm sorry, sir."*

*"Don't worry, Hollis. I'm sure the Captain survived. Let's find him before the Trade Federation does."*

—Lieutenant Gavyn Sykes and Lutin Hollis

As the civilians waited for transport, Sykes collapsed the rock bed behind them and then landed to take one of the speeders he had escorted. Lutin Hollis, another member of Sykes' resistance band, contacted him and said that Kael had been shot down and was missing. While Sykes believed that the captain was okay, he quickly joined in the search for Kael.

Exceprts From See-Threepio's Journal / Exceprts From Darth Vader's Diary

**YEAR: -32** ○

**ENTRY: 1**

It has always been a boring life being Watto's slave here on Tatooine, until today! A Jedi Knight called Qui-Gon Jinn and a girl called Padmé have come looking for parts to repair their ship. Watto has the parts they need, but they have no money.

Padmé is very beautiful. She looks like an angel! I have offered to help Qui-Gon by entering the next podrace and using the prize money to buy parts.

**ENTRY: 4** ○

Master Anakin has told the travellers about the Podracer he built. He is the only human who is quick enough to compete in the dreadful sport. I know that he is a gifted pilot, but I cannot bear to watch!

Master Anakin has offered to help Qui-Gon by entering a Podrace and using the prize money to buy parts. Qui-Gon Jinn is very interested in Master Anakin. It seems that his midi-chlorian count is unusually high.

○ **ENTRY: 2**

Qui-Gon believes that there is something special about me. He has made a deal with Watto. If I win the podrace, I will be set free! But Watto will not let my mother go, too.

**ENTRY: 5** ○

Qui-Gon has made a deal with Watto. If Master Anakin wins the Podrace, he will be set free. Qui-Gon tried to free Shmi, too, but Watto will not risk losing two slaves.



## ENTRY: 6

Vast, cheering crowds are at the arena to see the Podrace. Qui-Gon told Master Anakin not to think, but just to use his instincts. I stood next to Artoo as the gangster Jabba the Hutt started the race.

## ENTRY: 7

I feel as if all my circuits are fusing! It has been such an exciting day!

Podracing is very dangerous – many competitors crash and explode into balls of flame. Sebulba, who is a dreadful cheat, tried to knock Anakin out of the race. Oh my goodness, I could hardly believe that he would survive in one piece! But Anakin got into first place on the final lap. Sebulba crashed as Anakin zoomed ahead and won!

## ENTRY: 3

The podrace was so exciting! Crowds of people came to the arena to see the podrace. That cheating Sebulba tried to knock me out of the race, but I got into first place on the final lap and I won. I am free!

## ENTRY: 8

Qui-Gon has taken Master Anakin with him to Coruscant, to train him as a Jedi. He found it very hard to say goodbye to his mother. He is my maker, and I wish him well. But I would like it better if I were a little less naked. I hope that Shmi does not sell me while he is away!



## ENTRY: 4

I am keen to train as a Jedi, but it was very hard to leave my mother behind. One day I will come back and free her!

Qui-Gon introduced me to his Padawan, Obi-Wan Kenobi. Before we left, we were attacked by a tattooed warrior! We escaped and went to Coruscant.

## ENTRY: 5

Padmé comes from a planet called Naboo, but it is under attack from the Trade Federation. The Queen is going to ask the Senate for help.

## ENTRY: 6

The Jedi Council tested me today. I don't think they were very pleased with me. But Qui-Gon says he will train me himself. I hope that I can be a Jedi like Qui-Gon one day!



...AS THE CITY OF THEED IS INVAD-  
ED BY THE FORCES OF THE EVIL TRADE  
FEDERATION, FOUR FRIENDS BEGIN AN  
ADVENTURE THEY WILL NEVER FORGET!

**ARROOWAKH-WAA!**

'COME WITH US,' YOU SAY, 'IT'LL BE FUN.' NOW YOU'VE GOTTEN ME INTO THIS TRAP!

**RORWORR**  
WOOKIEE SCOUT  
AND HIS DROID TDO-2

WE NEED YOU TO GET US ALL OUT OF IT. QUIETLY, TOO!

**DEEL**  
TWI'LEK SCOUNDREL

**SIA-LAN**  
JEDI PADAWAN

**ARANI**  
SCOUNDREL

EXCEPT IN OUR WAKE, THE YOUNG MASTER SAYS

NEIMODIAN TROOPS ARE EVERYWHERE!

THERE'S SO MUCH GOING ON IN THE FORCE.

# BATTLE FOR THEED

Written by Michael A. Stackpole Pencils by Daniel Veesenmeyer  
Character Design by Adam Hughes  
Edited by Bill Blawiech Lettered by Sean Glenn

SEE THAT DOOR?

THE SECURITY DOOR WITH THE WARNING SIGNS?

YES. YOU HAVE TO GET US THROUGH IT.

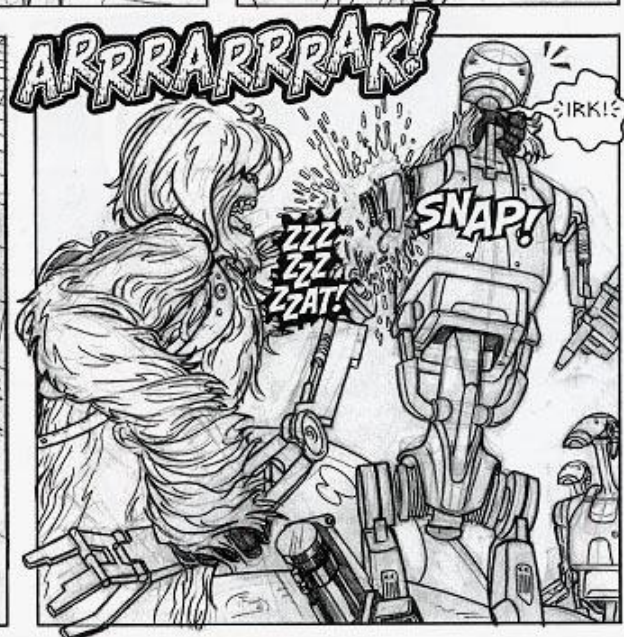
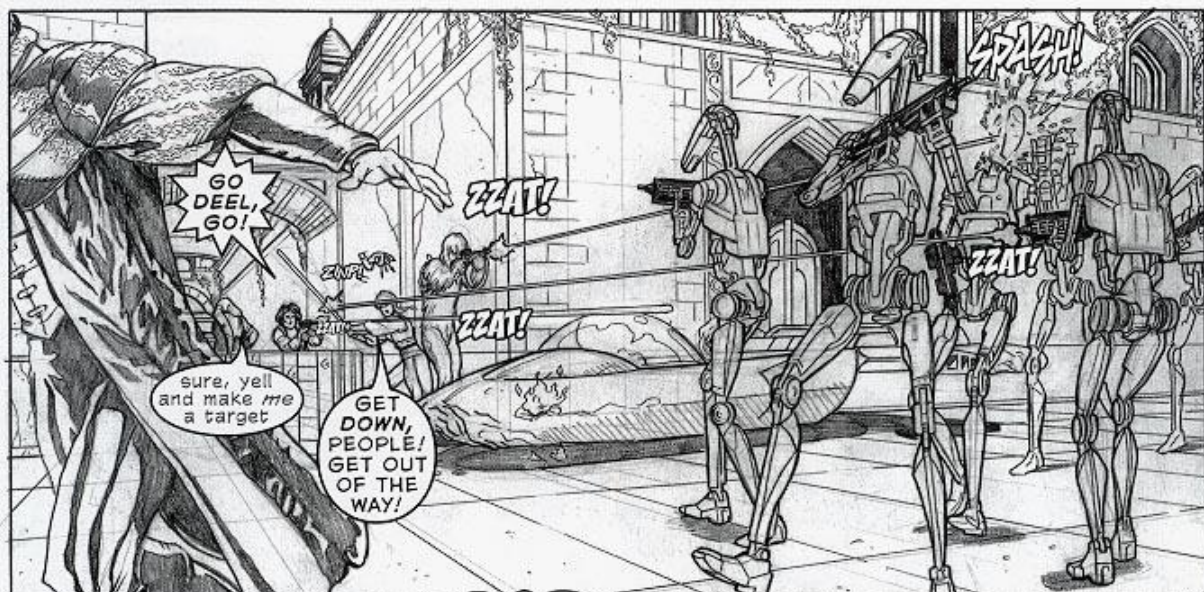
**OOORRAWK!**

WHEN DEEL GOES FOR THE DOOR, WE'LL HAVE TO COVER HIM!

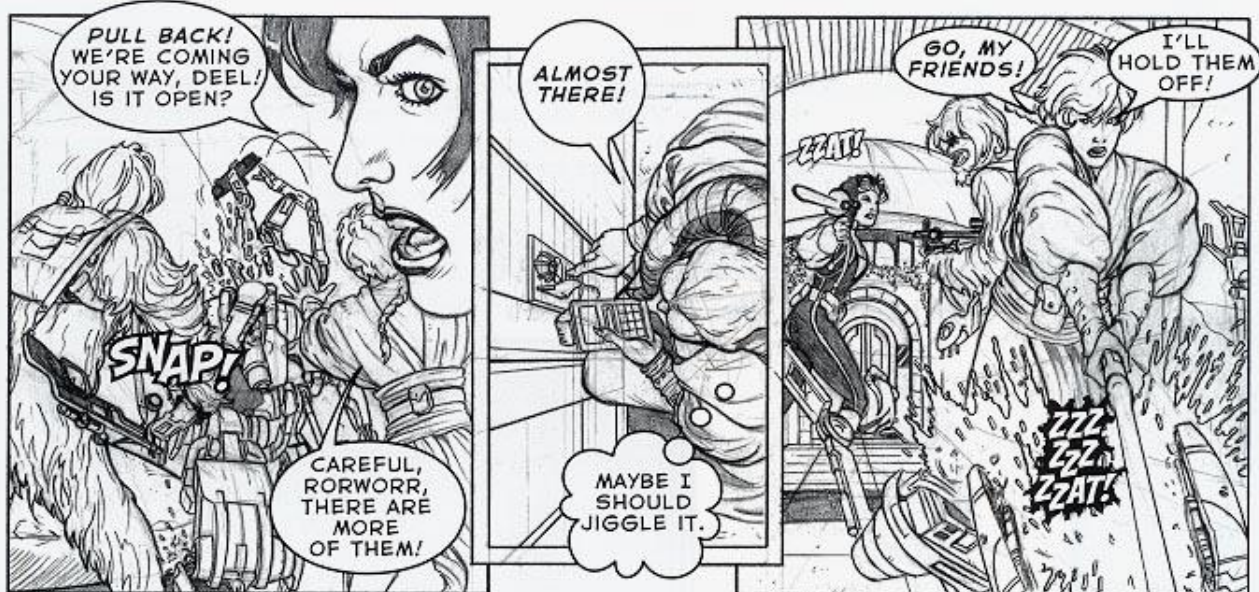
HE SAYS

NO NEED TO TRANSLATE, I CAUGHT THE TONE.









## (Battle For Naboo)

*"Lieutenant Sykes, I've located the captain's starfighter. It, it doesn't look good."*  
—Lutin Hollis

Approaching Kael's last known position, Bravo Squadron split up to search for him. Sykes traveled in his *Seraph*-class urban landspeeder to look for him on the ground and was forced to destroy many Federation B1 battle droids riding on Single Trooper Aerial Platforms, who were also searching for Kael. Two Armored Assault Tanks blocked Sykes' path on a bridge, but he destroyed them and continued on.

*"This base is programmed to defend itself. This is your last warning."*  
*"Not until I get some answers."*  
—The mine operator and Gavyn Sykes

After passing the bridge, Sykes saw what he thought was Borvo's personal transport, but the ship flew off before he could get close. As Sykes moved on, he found a plasma mining camp under attack by droid forces. He intervened, destroying the tanks.

Once the tanks were gone, he contacted the mine director and asked for information about Captain Kael. The director told Sykes to back off, saying he was running a legal operation. When Sykes refused to comply with the director's warning, the mining camp's remaining defenses opened fire on him, and he was forced to destroy the camp administration building. Sykes had then no choice but to disable the rest of the camp, knocking out the turrets and the camp's plasma miners. When the defenses were destroyed, Lutin Hollis, one of Sykes' wingmen, contacted him, saying he had discovered the Captain's fighter. Sykes saw them on his sensors and went to that position.

*"Sykes. The Hutt be...trayed us."*  
*"And the rescued prisoners?"*  
*"He'll use them...as slaves. Rescue them. Good luck. Ah."*  
—Captain Kael's last words

The Trade Federation was still looking for Kael, and Sykes had to fight through more Single Trooper Aerial Platforms and two more Armored Assault Tanks. He also noticed droid bombers, and he had to shoot them down before they could find the Captain. After the bombers were down, the rest of the Federation forces retreated, allowing Sykes to approach the Captain. Kael was mortally wounded, and he used his final moments to warn Sykes about the Hutt's

betrayal. Sykes asked about the civilians he had rescued; Kael replied Borvo would sell them as slaves. With his last breath, he ordered Sykes to rescue them.

*"Vedd, I'll need my N-1 again. We're going after the Hutt."*  
—Gavyn Sykes

*"Lieutenant Sykes, cease your approach! We will open fire."*  
*"Your boss killed my captain and enslaved my people. He will be brought to justice."*  
—One of Borvo's mercenaries and Gavyn Sykes

As Sykes approached Borvo's location on Porso Hill, he was hailed by one of the Hutt's starfighters, warning him to stay away, but Sykes refused to comply with the demand. The Hutt's fighters subsequently attacked him, and he shot them down while avoiding their fire and that from laser turrets. After Sykes eliminated that threat, he destroyed a wall of mines blocking his path. Kol Kotha, one of the Hutt's mercenaries and Sykes' former wingmate, approached directly in front of Sykes, asking the Naboo pilot not to fire on him in order to give him the chance to explain that he wanted to help. Sykes cautiously accepted his help, telling Kotha to lead him to the Hutt. The two flew onward, taking fire from more turrets. Kotha led Sykes to the Hutt but had to retreat, having suffered damage to his starfighter and a weapons malfunction.

*"Uh, Lieutenant, we're out of torpedoes. You're going to have to make the run."*  
—Bravo Squadron pilot Vedd Deviss

As Sykes flew in to meet the Hutt, Borvo launched his freighter. Adela Tyché, the freighter's pilot, contacted Sykes and translated Borvo's words, which was to offer the Naboo pilot a bribe to join Borvo. When Sykes refused, the rest of the Hutt fighters launched to defend the freighter as Deviss and Hollis arrived to reinforce Sykes. Sykes ordered them to attack the freighter while he provided cover, but the two were out of torpedoes. Sykes instead proceeded to attack the freighter himself while the other pilots provided cover. Despite fire from turrets, Sykes delivered heavy damage to Borvo's ship; as it exploded, the cockpit separated, sending Borvo and Tyché flying away in retreat.

*"Nice work, Naboo boy. You saved your people, and Borvo is limping back to Nal Hutta."*  
—Kol Kotha, to Gavyn Sykes, at the conclusion of the attack

**Vedd Deviss:** *"Now what, Lieutenant?"*

**Gavyn Sykes:** *"We get back to the Trade Federation, but I don't know how or where yet. And we're still short of pilots."*



**Kol Kotha:** *"A few days ago the Hutt had me scout out a couple of prison camps near here. Start by liberating those and you'll get all the pilots you'll need."*

**Gavyn Sykes:** *"Good idea, Kol. You're welcome to stick around. Let's move."*

The squadron first had to locate the camp. Under cover of darkness, Bravo Squadron infiltrated a valley, and Lieutenant Gavyn Sykes, the flight lead, ordered the pilots to listen to Kotha's recon report. Kotha said they had information that Camp Four was located in an area north of the valley. The Trade Federation had completely stripped the area for its own purposes. One of the pilots, Lutin Hollis, broke formation to look for the camp, because he suspected his family was in there. He gave away the squadron's position when he flew into an area occupied by an installation that was part of Camp Four, and the base responded by launching many droid starfighters, as well as a landing craft. Sykes ordered the flight to break and attack, and the squadron had to escape under heavy fire from the base and from a missile turret. The landing craft continued its voyage through the valley to drop off speeders at processing centers.

*"Look at the size of that camp!"*

—Lieutenant Sykes

Sykes followed and shot down the landing craft, which tried to fight back by launching airborne mines from a rearward launcher. Sykes dedicated its destruction to the planet of Naboo.

Meanwhile, more starfighters and bombers attacked local farmhouses. Kotha said they did not have time to help, but the Naboo pilots shot down the attackers anyway. With that threat eliminated, they continued the search for the camp, flying over three gunboats patrolling the nearby waters. The sensors on Sykes' N-1 starfighter located Camp Four in the valley below them, and he reported it to the squadron and warned them to watch for anti-air emplacements. Flying through a canyon, the squadron found a Trade Federation hangar that was releasing troop carriers. Kotha proposed that they find a way to get in from the ground. Kotha also proposed that the Federation was using the speeders to transport prisoners from across the planet, and Sykes realized the speeders were heading straight into the camp. After shooting down the starfighter defenders, Sykes landed in the hangar and took a Heavy STAP. He programmed several unoccupied troop carriers to enter the base and followed them in.

*"Halt! Where are your prisoners? ...Enemy in the compound!"*

—A battle droid challenges Sykes at the front gate

Once inside the gates, however, the battle droids scanned the carriers and noticed they were unoccupied. They ordered Sykes to stop, but when he continued to head into the camp, the base went into high alert. Tanks and Heavy STAPS poured out of their hangars, but Sykes managed to destroy them. He traveled up the nearby cliff and found the first cell blocks. Kotha tried to strafe the camp's power generator in his starfighter but missed, and subsequent fire from laser turrets drove him off, forcing Sykes to destroy it himself before moving to the next cell block.

Once inside, the prisoners called to him. Sykes told them to stand back so he could blow the door. When they were free, the prisoners ran to nearby civilian speeders, and Sykes escorted them uphill to the next set of cell blocks, destroying turrets and droids along the way. The rescued prisoners hid behind a security hangar while Sykes switched to a Gian speeder inside. He came out into a maelstrom of fire from the defense turrets. Hollis strafed the camp, blowing a hole into a wall so Sykes could destroy next generator and take the laser fencing off-line. Sykes was able to free the prisoners in that block, and then went up another cliff to take down the generators powering the entrance to the next section of camp.

*"I couldn't let you guys have all the fun!"*

—Lutin Hollis, as he attacks the camp

As Sykes escorted the prisoners downhill into the last group of cell blocks, they were ambushed and trapped by more tanks and fighters. Hollis flew in and took out several tanks and also blew a hole in the wall. The breach allowed Sykes to take down the last generator. Sykes freed the last prisoners and went up a separate hill to destroy the generator, which powered the rear gate. After Hollis' strafing run, Sykes told him to get clear and that they would handle it from there. Once the gates were down, the rescued prisoners were able to leave. Sykes led them out while firing at the last droids.

*"Everyone to the speeders. Hurry!"*

—One of the prisoners

With the camp liberated, the Resistance gained new recruits, including several seasoned officers. With an expanded force, the Resistance set its sights next on retaking the capital.

(Starfighter)

Having joined forces with the Lok Revenants, Naboo pilot Rhys Dallows led them to his home planet to fight the Trade Federation invasion.

The allied pilots arrived over Naboo and discovered a convoy of Trade Federation Superfreighters loaded with munitions. The pilots were engaged by *Vulture* droid starfighters, and the raiders were forced to defend themselves. Almost overwhelmed, Reti infiltrated one of the freighters after Vana Sage disabled it. The Toydarian was able to program a wing of *Scarab*-class droid starfighters to assist the raiders. The droids responded to targeting information forwarded to them by Sage.

Three Trade Federation Missile Frigates arrived to destroy the freighter that Reti had infiltrated, but were quickly held off and destroyed by the raiders. Droid escape pods launched, but they were also destroyed by the raiders. More fighters engaged the raiders, but eventually the entire convoy was destroyed, including the captured freighter, denying the Trade Federation Droid Army its supplies. Rhys contacted the resistance down on the planet and agreed to deliver the supplies to them.

*"The resistance leaders said they'd be here, but there's no sign of them."*

*"They should be here by now. They must have run into trouble in the canyon."*

—Reti and Rhys Dallows at the start of the mission.

He set up a rendezvous with other Naboo forces, but when they failed to show up, he deduced they were in trouble and needed to fly through the canyons to the resistance base. When Reti voiced concerns about flying in the canyon, Dallows reassured the Toydarian he had flown those canyons before.

*"Are you crazy? I'm overloaded with munitions here!"*

*"Don't worry, I know the way. Just follow me."*

—Reti to Rhys Dallows after the latter suggested they fly into the canyon.

Almost immediately, Dallows and Reti came under fire from Trade Federation patrols looking for the base, but the two kept on flying through the canyon. At the first clearing, Dallows destroyed a dropship attempting to land more battle droids. After wiping out the tanks and troop transports which had already landed, he and Reti continued through the canyon. At the second clearing, Dallows destroyed another dropship and more droids. Leading Reti into the canyon, he warned the canyon was going to get narrower. The Federation had



stationed Turret Mines in that portion of the canyon. Dallows destroyed the mines while Reti was fearfully requesting an escort.

*"They're destroying our base. Hurry!"*

—Bravo Squadron pilot

After passing through the minefield, the two pilots flew into the third clearing and met with the Resistance who were flying their N-1 starfighters against Scarab droid starfighters and AMTs. Dallows helped destroy the opposition, and subsequently received a distress call from the base further down the canyon, which was under heavy droid attack. The Resistance Laser turrets were firing at troop transports and tanks when Dallows and the other pilots arrived, and their combined firepower quickly wiped out the attacking force. Reti arrived and delivered the much-needed supplies, and he and Dallows vowed to help the resistance. They would soon have the opportunity.

The Trade Federation had rounded up the local populace and placed the people in prison camps. One of the camps was set up on islands located near a waterfall on the Solleu River.

The group consisted of Rescue Flight, members of Bravo Squadron, and the Toydarian Reti, formulated a plan to liberate this camp.

*"Okay Rescue Leader, here's the plan: Our starfighters will supply air cover while you free the prisoners. The Trade Federation has set up a shield gate, blocking our exit route, but I'm pretty sure we can solve that problem with a proton torpedo or two. Once we destroy the gate, proceed down the river fast, we'll be clearing a path in front of you. When you reach open sea, head for the Europa Islands where you'll rendezvous with a resistance freighter."*

—Rhys Dallows

The rescuers approached the camps through a cave that led to the bottom of the waterfall. Rhys and the other pilots were the first to emerge from behind the waterfall and were immediately fired upon by turret droids. Rhys ordered the Rescue Boats to hold back while the rest of them destroyed the droids. After enough Federation defenses were neutralized, Rescue Leader ordered Rescue Flight to pick up the prisoners at the camps. The Bravo pilots defended the Boats from patrols of STAPs and Patrol Boats, and also destroyed a shield gate that was blocking Rescue Flight's escape route. While the Rescue Boats finished at the prison camps, the pilots cleared away turret droids in the valley between the camps and a nearby sea to ensure the boats' safety.

About the time Rescue Flight began moving downstream, droid starfighters and a dropship sent by the Trade Federation arrived in the area and headed for the mouth of the river. Bravo Flight engaged the Federation craft and was able to destroy the dropship before it could deploy any tanks. The Bravo pilots continued to fight with the droid starfighters until all of the droids were defeated. When the Rescue Boats reached the sea, they came under attack from additional Patrol Boats along with a wave of Trade Federation droid bombers. Bravo Squadron was able to destroy the new attackers. As Rescue Flight approached the Europa Islands, more bombers and Patrol Boats approached to attack both Rescue Flight and the *Mercatan*. The pilots fended off the last attack, allowing all the civilians from all three Rescue Boats to be moved to the freighter. *Mercatan* then took off under escort from Bravo Squadron.

(Galactic Battlegrounds: OOM-9 Campaign)

*"My troops are in position to begin searching the swamps for these rumored underwater villages. They will not stay hidden for long."*  
—OOM-9

Darth Maul had come into play during the invasion of Naboo by his master, Darth Sidious. He worked with the Trade Federation and was able to interrogate a Bothan surveyor named Leika to uncover Gungan governor Boss Ganne's stronghold. Maul and Commander OOM-9 traveled aboard an S-DST, followed by Single Trooper Aerial Platforms to battle the Gungans at their stone fortifications. The Gungans were putting up a stern defense. STAPS were being destroyed everywhere. Then, Maul jumped on one of the remaining STAPS and flew toward Boss Ganne and his fellow Ankura general, slaughtering Gungans that stood in his way with his lightsaber. He beheaded Ganne's co-general and disarmed the Boss, resulting in his capture. Using a mind trick on Ganne, Maul was then led to the city of Rellias and used Ganne as a hostage to get the Gungan soldiers to open the gates. The Trade Federation was given intelligence that there were more underwater cities. Although most of the Trade Federation Droid Army could not function underwater, specialized droidekas were produced to back Maul in his raid of the Rellias channel and its adjoining communities including the great Gungan city, Otoh Gunga.

Forces of B1 battle droids led by OOM-9 occupied and cleared the swamps above Lake Paonga, leading down to Otoh Gunga. However, word of the invasion allowed just enough time for Otoh Gunga to be warned of the upcoming attack and evacuated. Maul once more interrogated Ganne for answers as to where Otoh Gunga would be, but an impulse urged the Boss to resist. As a result, the

Sith Lord killed him. News of the returning of Queen Amidala to Naboo, from outworld duties, stalled the swamp assault. After hearing this news, Maul left OOM-9 in charge of the raid and raced back to Theed to instruct Viceroy Nute Gunray to prepare the capital for the upcoming attack. OOM-9 led the assault forces in Maul's absence. Small Gungan communities were eradicated, but Otoh Gunga was found abandoned. OOM-9 aborted the final objectives of the swamp invasion, leading his forces back to Theed

(Galactic Battlegrounds: Boss Nass Campaign)

After escaping Otoh Gunga, Boss Rugor Nass and three Bongo Advanced Scouts battled several Trade Federation Patrol Boats and colo claw fish before arriving at the Gungan sacred place near the Gallo Mountains. There, a large army of Gungan troops who had likewise fled the city waited for him. As he arrived, a scout brought a report of a nearby Federation camp. OOM-9 commanded it and was nearby directing the landing of a droid transport ship, but was not present at the camp itself. Nass ordered the destruction of the camp, and his Gungan troops carried out the task quickly. They destroyed all the B1 battle droids at the site and razed the buildings with few casualties.

Boss Nass and the Gungans had no time to celebrate as Queen Padmé Amidala had just landed in the swamps along with Captain Quarsh Panaka, Anakin Skywalker, Obi-Wan Kenobi, Qui-Gon Jinn, and their entourage. She asked for permission to journey to the Sacred Place. Boss Nass obliged them, and the Naboo group went through the swamps on foot. They battled many Trade Federation troops, who were sometimes already fighting members of the Resistance who had retreated into the swamps. At one point they were joined by two Naboo light scout frigates and an aquatic transport, which they used to sink a Federation Ocean Troop Transport and to travel up the swamp.

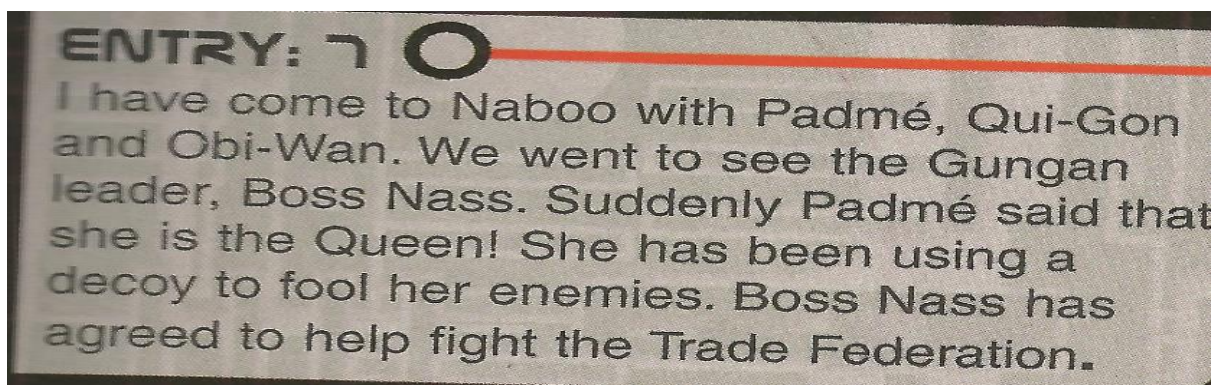
(Jedi Power Battles)

Along the way, the two Jedi fought through a large force of over 50 Federation battle droids in a dry riverbed, including one OOM-series command droid. The two Jedi also disrupted a command center. Moving past it, they destroyed 3 Plasma battle droids and 26 more battle droids.<sup>[4]</sup>

After that, they encountered 5 more Plasma battle droids guarding a bridge, along with more battle droids, some carrying missile launchers. Past the bridge, the Jedi Force Jumped through a set of ruins and avoided being eaten by carnivorous plants and the kreetles.<sup>[4]</sup>

After the ruins, they passed into the swamps and faced seven more battle droids and more carnivorous plants. They also avoided a Gungan pit trap full of kreetles.

Near the sacred place, they were challenged by thirteen Gungan warriors; the two Jedi drove them off with non-lethal force. They then met the Gungan Security Chief. The Chief was bested in a short duel with the Jedi. During the duel, he leapt onto a statue several times to throw boomas or call in reinforcements—other Gungan warriors and kaadu. Thinking the Jedi had been worn down by his warriors, the Chief engaged the two Jedi again with his electropole, although he was defeated. Impressed, he let the Naboo proceed to see Boss Nass.



(Battle For Naboo)

*"Panaka? Maybe he can get us organized."*

*"We need to locate him first. Let's move."*

—A Naboo soldier and Sykes

After the Queen's meeting with the Gungans, Captain Quarsh Panaka sent out a message on the coded Royal Security Forces emergency frequency, directing all officers who received the message to rendezvous on Rasker Hill, near the south ridge. Lieutenant Sykes, in a Gian speeder, and other members of his resistance cell in a *Seraph*-class speeder, received the message. Shortly thereafter, Panaka came under attack and informed the approaching reinforcements via comlink

Trade Federation Single Trooper Aerial Platforms (STAPs) and two droid starfighters attacked civilians and resistance members at the south ridge. Sykes's resistance cell joined Panaka, who was in a Gian speeder, to fight off the Trade Federation forces. After the first group of STAPs were destroyed, another small

group of STAPs appeared near Rasker Hill and were quickly defeated by the Naboo fighters. The resistance's quick actions saved nearby farms from destruction, although some farms did sustain damage.

The three Naboo speeders then met on top of Rasker Hill, where Panaka praised Sykes's training and explained the strategy by which the Naboo forces would free the planet. He ordered Sykes to take his forces to guard the rear entrance of Theed to prepare for the next battle, and to then to follow the Captain. Sykes, in turn, ordered the third speeder to head to the south ridge. Panaka and Sykes drove off Rasker Hill and parked nearby, with Panaka dismounting to continue his briefing. He reminded Sykes to call him on the coded secure emergency frequency if there was trouble and wished the Lieutenant good luck. As Sykes departed to comply with the Captain's orders, he gave his word that he would cover the Captain.

(Galactic Battlegrounds: Boss Nass Campaign)

The **Second Battle of Spinnaker** was a retaliatory strike to recapture Spinnaker from the Trade Federation during the Invasion of Naboo. Forces led by Boss Rugor Nass attacked Camp 14 at Spinnaker, destroying a Trade Federation monument there and replacing it with a Gungan one, to serve as a rallying point for the Gungan forces.

The **Liberation of Harte Secur** was a retaliatory battle where forces led by [Boss Rugor Nass](#) attacked [Camp Six](#) and the occupied [city](#) of [Harte Secur](#) to rescue their [Fambaa](#) beasts of burden. The Gungans destroyed a Federation command there, and getting their attention, drew them out to the [Great Grass Plains](#), thus liberating the city.

The Trade Federation sent three armies to engage the Gungans. Army A engaged the Gungan army head-on, Army B flanked from the side of the Plains, and Army C approached from the south ridge of Theed.

(Battle For Naboo)

*"This is Palmer on the southern ridge. We've picked up Trade Federation forces moving our way, fast."*  
—Palmer

Trade Federation Army C had entered the south ridge en route to the Great Grass Plains to engage the Gungan Grand Army in a flanking maneuver. Upon

reaching the area, Sykes contacted Panaka to inform him the south ridge was compromised; in turn, Panaka ordered Sykes to gather his forces to intercept the convoy. Sykes, still driving his Gian speeder, pursued the convoy, but a collapsing pillar landed on a trailing Trade Federation Armored Assault Tank (AAT) and blocked his path. Simultaneously, the Trade Federation attacked the Naboo soldiers at the south ridge proper; a soldier named Palmer contacted Sykes to inform him of the attack. As two droid bombers and a group of AATs headed toward the Naboo airbase, Sykes raced off to help. En route, he destroyed two static laser turrets and shot down the bombers. By that point, the AATs had made it to the base. When Palmer radioed again, Sykes responded that he was on his way; he moved in and saved the base from the attacking AATs and prevented the base from experiencing heavy casualties. Two N-1 starfighters and a *Seraph*-class speeder were parked at the base at that time. Panaka ordered Sykes to switch craft at the base's hangar to stop the convoy, and Sykes took an experimental bomber for the attack.

Sykes approached the convoy after airborne mines and starfighter cover placed in the way failed to stop him. He dropped proton bombs on three staging areas, causing much damage to the Federation forces. The Trade Federation Airbase was meanwhile preparing to launch an attack, which Panaka warned him about. Sykes flew in to destroy the base, dedicating its destruction to his Queen. Even though the staging areas were now compromised, he still had to deal with the convoy's remaining Multi-Troop Transports and tanks, which were still moving toward its target. As he and the convoy passed into Widow's Valley, Palmer told him to watch out for the valley's unstable pillars. To further delay the convoy, Sykes started knocking down the pillars. Laser turrets placed near the Federation installations and in the valley fired at Sykes, who responded by launching a proton bomb. As Sykes flew into Widow's Valley, Panaka informed him that they had spotted a bridge ahead of the convoy and were going to destroy it. As the convoy neared the bridge, situated over a canyon, a Naboo speeder dropped off thermal detonators, which subsequently failed to go off. Just before the convoy reached the end of the bridge, Sykes dropped one of his bombs on the bridge, which went up in a large explosion along with the remainder of the convoy.

With the convoy destroyed, Panaka congratulated Sykes again and told him to report to Theed.



(Starfighter)

Army B discovered a Resistance outpost on the Plains and engaged it. The pirate Nym, after losing his base to the Trade Federation, agreed to join forces with the Naboo resistance and engaged Army B.

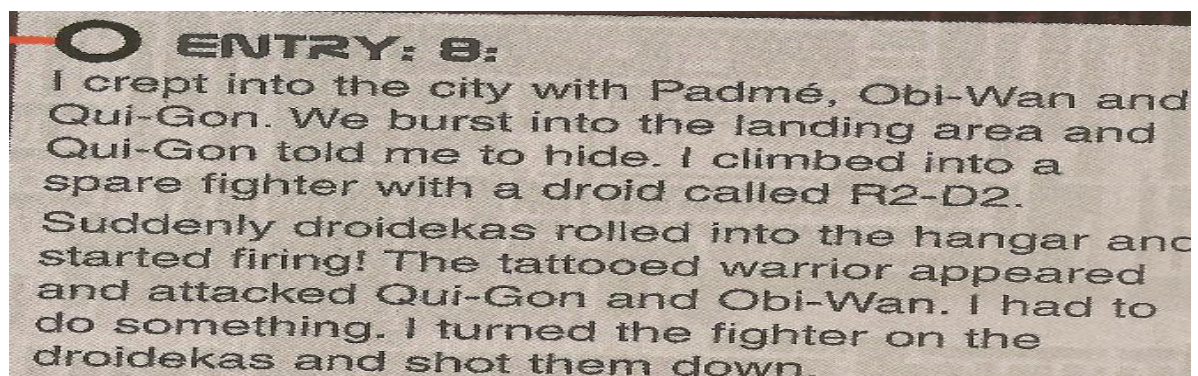
*"Nym! We're outnumbered!"*

*"Then we fight to the end."*

—Vana Sage and Nym during the battle

A scout found the approaching Army B and raced back to warn the base. The outpost commander ordered the outpost to prepare for battle. The Federation deployed Heavy Artillery Guns to engage the outpost. The resistance's laser turrets opened fire on the tanks. The spacers Nym and Vana Sage were flying overhead searching for the Federation army, so the commander contacted them and asked them to protect the outpost. Nym used the Bomblet generator on his starfighter, the *Havoc* to take out the enemy artillery. The outpost commander kept up a running commentary as Nym attacked the tanks.<sup>[5]</sup>

While Nym was attacking the HAGs, two Federation C-9979 landing craft and several dropships landed and disgorged a number of Armored Assault Tanks to attack the outpost. A squadrons of Scarab droid starfighters arrived to support the tanks. Sage engaged the fighters in her personal fighter, the *Guardian Mantis*. Even though the first wave was destroyed, more droid starfighters and a squad of droid bombers joined the fight. Sage commented to Nym that they were outnumbered, but Nym was determined to fight to the end. Nym's wingmate and Bravo Squadron pilot Rhys Dallows as well as the Toydarian Reti arrived at that moment to support the Naboo outpost. Nym told them to attack anything that moved. With a reinforced squadron, Nym was able to fight off the rest of the Federation forces and save the outpost from destruction. The outpost commander thanked the pilots as they flew off.



Padmé escaped with her team, but my fighter was on automatic pilot! It zoomed up into space to join the battle against the Droid Control Ship.

R2-D2 managed to get the fighter out of autopilot and we flew into the Droid Control Ship. I shot at the main reactor and the Droid Control Ship started to lose power. It was time to get out of there! I escaped just as it exploded into tiny pieces.

When I landed back on Naboo, I found that we had won! But the tattooed warrior was a Sith Lord, and he has killed my friend Qui-Gon.

As a third of the Federation army had been destroyed at the outpost, and another third destroyed by Gavyn Sykes at the south ridge of Theed, the Gungans were able to hold out long enough for the Naboo Security Forces to infiltrate Theed. With the *Lucrehulk*-class Droid Control Ship ship in orbit destroyed, the invasion ended with the capture of Viceroy Nute Gunray.

### **Darth Maul: End Game**

As the shadow of the Trade Federation spreads over Naboo, a streak of darkness cuts through the Federation's heart.

For Darth Sidious has sent his apprentice to oversee the annihilation of Qui-Gon Jinn and Obi-Wan Kenobi, plunging the galaxy into war and announcing the presence of the Sith to the Jedi.

The balance between dark and light is on a precarious edge, and for Darth Maul, the beginning may actually be the

The Sith Infiltrator was in hyperspace when Darth Maul engaged the autopilot to give himself time to think. Reflection was so foreign to him that the impulse to look inward left him momentarily astonished—though not enough to keep him seated at the ship's controls. Shrugging out of the acceleration chair's harness, he rose and paced from the control console to the aft arc of passenger seats; then from the entrance of the lift to the power-cell array access panels. Though Tatooine was light-years behind him, he couldn't shake the planet from his thoughts, and despite the Scimitar's speed and cloaking ability, it was as if the sleek ship, too, were incapable of outracing the past.



If I had it to do over again...

In his thoughts he was dropped into the speeder bike's open cockpit, racing across Tatooine's desolate landscape; in the next moment, executing an impromptu though acrobatic leap that carried him to the yellow ground, his lightsaber in hand, its energy blade meeting that of the Jedi Master whose name he had since learned was Qui-Gon Jinn.

Probe droids Maul had dispatched upon landing on Tatooine had located the bearded human Jedi in the stands of the Podrace stadium and later in the settlement known as Mos Espa. One of the trio of Dark Eyes had also discovered the Queen of Naboo's starship where it had put down in the wastes of the Xelric Draw. Intent on availing himself of every advantage, Maul had waited for Qui-Gon to set out on foot for the gleaming ship before launching his surprise attack. Qui-Gon and a human slave boy had hurried across the oven-like wastes while Maul watched from the padded comfort of the speeder's seat. Maul's eyes were better adapted than human eyes to the glare of Tatooine's twin suns, his lithe body better suited than the Jedi heavyweight's to fighting in soft sand ...

And yet nothing had gone as planned.

Somehow Qui-Gon heard the sibilant whine of the speeder's repulsorlift and had whirled aside at the last instant. With some 250 meters separating Qui-Gon and the slave boy from Queen Amidala's vessel, Maul would have had time to whip the speeder through a turn and make a second pass. Instead, in his eagerness to face off at last with a celebrated Jedi lightsaber Master, he had leapt into action ...

Qui-Gon's shrewd readiness had almost taken Maul off his guard. But the first ferocious clash of their blades had told him that the Jedi was equally surprised. And why shouldn't he be—about being attacked not only by a Dathomiri Zabrak who had appeared out of nowhere, but also by one trained in the dark arts and wielding a crimson-bladed lightsaber? Regardless, Qui-Gon had quieted his mind and brought his imposing might to bear against Maul's agility. He had matched Maul's furious strokes with a disciplined intensity all his own. In the midst of their no-quarter contest the Jedi had even managed to order the slave boy to flee for the safety of the waiting ship, where Maul had nearly forgotten all about him.

The Force favors this Jedi! Maul recalled thinking.

After all the droids, assassins, gangsters, and soldiers he had vanquished, finally a worthy opponent. Not since he had fought and been defeated by his own Master, Darth Sidious, had Maul been so committed to a challenge.

Then, just when Qui-Gon's stamina was beginning to flag and the fight was tipping in Maul's favor, the incomprehensible had occurred: Qui-Gon had fled. Instead of standing fast and fighting to the finish, he had bounded onto the lowered boarding ramp of the Royal Starship as it was lifting off, leaving Maul—sandblasted as much by disenchantment as raw anger—to watch the craft disappear into Tatooine's blue sky.

Many a being had run from Maul, but never a worthy one.

When, on orders from his Master, he had single-handedly butchered the trainers and trainees at the Orsis combat academy five years earlier, not a being had fled. Not the Mandalorian Meltch nor his pair of lethal Rodians; not Trezza or his well-trained Nautolan ward, Kilindi. All had stood their ground and died with honor. Spinelessness was something that had never entered Maul's imaginings. What, then, was he now supposed to think of the Jedi, whom he had been raised to hate since infancy?

On Coruscant, before leaving for Tatooine, Maul had found it impossible to contain his enthusiasm. At last we reveal ourselves, Master, he had said to Sidious. And in the end that long-awaited moment of revelation had led to nothing more than disappointment. Watching the departing starship, Maul had wondered: Could he succeed in tracking the Jedi and the Queen a second time? How would his failure impact the overall mission?

At the time he had tried to make excuses for himself, blaming his inability to overpower Qui-Gon on the leg wound he had sustained during his brief capture by Togorian pirates. Or the slave boy might have been to blame—a seeming nexus of Force energy, the boy had somehow abetted Qui-Gon in the fight. But Maul had known better than to make excuses to his Master, or even mention the run-in with the Togrutians.

But if he had it to do over again, he wouldn't make it a challenge.

Even if that meant depriving himself of the thrill of combat and the pleasure of seeing the pained surprise in Qui-Gon's eyes when Maul's blade pierced him. He

would simply race in at top speed with his lightsaber already ignited and decapitate Qui-Gon Jinn where he stood. That way he might also have been able to pilot the speeder through the ship's open hatch, kill Qui-Gon's Padawan, Obi-Wan Kenobi, and capture the Queen ...

How his Master would have praised him then! Instead Maul had been forced to weather Sidious's obvious disenchantment in abject humiliation. Darth Sidious had dismissed the setback, almost as if attributing Maul's failure to—what? Surely not fate, since his Master was as much as overseeing that. That left only Maul's lack of ability.

His weakness.

Currently the two Jedi, the Queen, and her entourage of handmaidens and protectors were on Coruscant, and Maul had been ordered to Naboo to assist the loathsome Neimoidians in rooting out possible pockets of resistance while Sidious modified the plan.

Even Sidious despised having to deal with the Neimoidians. So the assignment to advise them felt like a punishment, as had happened following Maul's massacre of the leaders of the Black Sun crime syndicate. Then Maul had been banished from Coruscant after confessing to Sidious that he had identified himself as a Sith Lord to one of the crime bosses before killing him.

In previous missions undertaken for his Master, Maul had felt allied to the dark side, but something had changed since Tatooine. Was he now in some sense engaging the Force itself, through its proxies, the Jedi? Should he have been more circumspect and lured the Jedi to him instead of initiating the attack?

Would his Master even allow him a second chance?

He wouldn't have believed that his hatred for the Jedi could deepen, but it had—for making him appear ineffectual in the eyes of Darth Sidious and for putting him in such an untenable fix ...

Enough thinking, Maul commanded himself.

The solution was that he couldn't allow himself to fail again.

Convinced that he had put the past to rest, Maul came to a halt in the Infiltrator's cabin. However, as if his legs had a will of their own, he was suddenly back in motion, pacing from the control console to the acceleration chairs.

If I had it to do over again...

\* \* \*

Holoimages of Naboo didn't do it justice.

A blue-green gem in an otherwise lackluster star system, the planet was one of the most pristine Maul had ever seen. This was as it should be, being the homeworld of Darth Sidious in his guise as Senator—perhaps soon to be Supreme Chancellor—Palpatine. Years earlier Maul had fallen prey to a plot that would have returned him to the world of his birth, Dathomir, but he had foiled the designs of his Nightsister abductors and pledged never to give thought to the life he might have led had he not been raised and trained by Sidious. As far as he was concerned, his homeworld was volcanic Mustafar, where he had fittingly been forged in fire.

Integral to his Master's plan, the Trade Federation's blockade of Naboo had been in the works for several years. The plan had required positioning Viceroy Nute Gunray as director of the shipping cartel, and manipulating the Republic Senate into allowing the Neimoidians to defend the enormous ships of their fleet with combat automata and other war machines. But the Senate had yet to learn the lengths to which the Trade Federation had gone to arm itself. The blockade had been in effect for some time when Sidious had ordered the Neimoidians to invade and occupy the planet, in response to the Jedi Order's attempt to intervene in the dispute. Attempts had been made on the lives of Qui-Gon Jinn and Obi-Wan Kenobi, but the Neimoidians had proved no match for the Jedi, and so the Forceful duo had managed to spirit Queen Amidala safely off Naboo.

The blockade had initially numbered hundreds of vessels, but Maul realized on arriving at Naboo that the Neimoidians—ever fretful about diminished profits—had since returned almost all of their ships to the business of intergalactic transport. Well, they were nothing more than merchants, he reminded himself, but their greediness offended him almost as much as Qui-Gon's cowardice.

At Tatooine it hadn't been necessary to employ the Scimitar's cloaking capabilities, but Maul did so now in order to maneuver the ship into the core of

what remained of the Trade Federation armada, which consisted of half a dozen freighters and a single ring-shaped Lucrehulk-class control ship, which oversaw all elements of the Neimoidians' droid army. Though formidable, the control ship was not impregnable, and the shoddiness of the operation sickened him. A stealth team made up of agents of the sort Trezza had trained on Orsis would have been able to infiltrate the vessel easily and destroy it from within, essentially paralyzing the Trade Federation's entire force.

Maul was certain he could penetrate the ship on his own, and was sorely tempted to, if only to rub Gunray's muzzled face in the flaws of his strategy. But he contented himself with piloting the Infiltrator to well within firing range of the control ship and a squadron of drone starfighters, without the Neimoidians even being aware of his presence.

\* \* \*

Maul took the Scimitar through a low and slow orbit around Naboo, studying aerial close-ups of the northern continent's grassy flatlands, lush hills, and extensive swamps and lakes. The galaxy boasted many such scenic wonders, but what made Naboo unique—and had in some sense doomed it—was the planet's plasma core, and the maze of underground tunnels and caverns the seething magma had fashioned. Those corridors, however, were not visible from above, save for various entry points to underground oceans that were allegedly rife with behemoth aquatic creatures, and home to an indigenous species of amphibian humanoids who resided in bubble cities maintained by plasma technology.

Once Darth Sidious had issued the command to invade Naboo, the assault and subsequent occupation had happened quickly—in part because of Queen Amidala's unwillingness to fight back. Not, in any case, that Naboo's small space force would have stood a chance against the Trade Federation army. Amidala may have been convinced that the Neimoidians were bluffing—which they certainly would have been without the goading of a Sith Lord—but even when the first landing ships had begun to disgorge antigrav tanks and thousands of infantry droids, the young Queen had ordered the Naboo Royal Security Forces to stand down and surrender. Only Viceroy Gunray's concern for the Trade Federation's galactic reputation had kept the invasion from turning into a slaughter. And only a fluke had allowed Amidala's starship to breach the blockade.

Maul flew the invisible ship over several sprawling makeshift detention centers, where the entire populations of some of Naboo's compact cities were now imprisoned and forced to answer to battle droids. Employing coordinates furnished by Darth Sidious, he set the Scimitar down outside the principal city of Theed, in a private hangar Sidious had assured him was secure.

Maul used his wrist link to program his trio of probe droids to monitor the hangar, then extracted the horseshoe-shaped speeder bike from its proprietary enclosure in the underside of the forward port-side cargo hatch. Clothed in black robes and a hooded field cloak, he straddled the speeder and aimed it for Theed.

The deserted city of stately domes and elegant spires struck him as an artifact—or perhaps a quaint historical replica closed for routine maintenance. Squads of B1 battle droids armed with blaster rifles patrolled the narrow streets and stood sentry outside the Theed Palace and other major buildings. Evading them effortlessly, Maul timed the patrols, made note of their numbers, and used the Force to create sounds that tricked the droids into moving in one direction or another. The idea of using droids as combatants annoyed him, for droids were only as good as their programming, and the bipedal, slender-headed B1 had limited skills and no ability to perform autonomously. Only the fact that the droids, too, were integral to his Master's more far-reaching plan kept Maul from revulsion. The deeper he ventured into the galaxy, the less honor he found.

But the Sith would redress that deficit once the Jedi were exterminated and the Republic brought down.

Maul stowed the speeder in an alley that ran alongside Theed's space force hangar, which was perched on the edge of an escarpment. Inside the domed building he took stock of Naboo's smart yellow-and-chromium Nubian fighters, neatly arranged in berths on several tiers, with an R2 astromech droid assigned to each ship. Despite the success of the occupation, the Neimoidians would have been wise to disable the fighters, but they were apparently incapable of tampering with anything of value. As with the control ship, Maul was tempted to show them the error of their ways, but again he did nothing.

Emerging from the hangar, he allowed himself to be detected and confronted by a patrol of droids. In a metallic voice, their officer unit ordered him to halt and raised its E-5 rifle. Reared by Darth Sidious's custodial droids on Mustafar, Maul—for many years—had had a complex relationship with droids of any sort. Certainly his fascination with technology owed in part to the circumstances of his

abnormal upbringing, but he had no compunction about destroying droids when the need arose, whether in training sessions or on missions. Still, he derived no enduring satisfaction from the contests, even when combating the most sophisticated among them.

Calling his long lightsaber to his hand, he made short work of the squad, decapitating them with his blade or exploding them by deflecting blaster bolts back at them. The brief altercation drew several more patrols, the members of which he similarly dismembered. Then he went on the hunt for a red-embazoned security unit, and when he found one he clamped his gloved hands around the thing's canted neck and ordered it to establish contact with Viceroy Gunray. When the droid became unresponsive he snapped its head off and used it as he might a comlink, demanding that the Neimoidian technician with whom he eventually spoke relay the communication directly to Gunray.

After a long moment, a patronizing voice issued from the battle droid's vocoder.

"Lord Maul," Gunray said, "we were not aware that you had arrived."

"Of course you weren't," Maul growled.

"How may we be of service?"

Maul squeezed the head so tightly, it began to fold in on itself.

"You can begin by making certain that every droid on Naboo responds to me as its chief commander, Viceroy. Or I will reduce this fine army of yours to a mountain of scrap."

\* \* \*

Maul paced the polished stone floor of the Theed Palace throne room in brooding silence, his lightsaber affixed to the black leather cummerbund that cinched his robes. Draped in shimmersilk, Nute Gunray and his green-skinned diplomatic attaché, Rune Haako, stood alongside each other before a tall, arch-topped window, wringing their thick-fingered hands. A silver protocol droid attended them, and a mechno-chair awaited the viceroy's pleasure.

"Several members of the Queen's Security Forces managed to elude our battle droids," Gunray was saying in wheedling Basic. "They rescued a group of Naboo

captives, and caused us some concern on an orbital station and at one of our plasma transshipment sites on the surface. Fortunately for us—and unfortunately for them—the Naboo fell in with a visiting Hutt who happens to be in our employ. He betrayed their plans and location.”

“They’re dead or imprisoned?” Maul stopped to ask.

“The captain is dead. Some of the others are still at large.”

Maul resumed his angry pacing. He was familiar with both Neimoidians from holotransmissions conducted between them and Darth Sidious during the past year. They had dealt with Sidious from across cold space, but now, confronted with a flesh-and-blood Sith Lord, it was all they could do to keep from trembling in awe. A musky, low-tide odor wafted from Haako, who affected purple robes and a horned bonnet.

“And the Gungans?” Maul said.

The pair traded baffled looks. “What of them, Lord Maul?” Haako asked.

“You’ve located their underwater cities and taken the necessary steps?”

“We’re ... in the process,” Gunray said. A three-tined tiara crowned his mottled blue face.

“How many have you captured?”

The nictitating membrane of Gunray’s red eyes spasmed. “How many?”

“Hundreds? Thousands?”

The viceroy improvised. “On the order of hundreds, I should think.”

Maul was revolted by the fact that he was in some measure responsible for Gunray’s lofty position, having executed missions that had elevated Gunray from a mere functionary to a being of galactic import. But Darth Sidious maintained that the Neimoidians were necessary to the Sith’s Grand Plan, and part of that plan called for Naboo to be secured, in preparation for the planet being annexed by the shipping cartel. With Queen Amidala on Coruscant, Naboo’s surrender



was not yet official, but Maul was certain that his Master would find a way to bring it about.

“Where are the Gungan captives?” Maul said.

Again the Neimoidians glanced at each other. They knew that Maul had already killed their treacherous confederate, Hath Monchar, and grasped that he would kill again if provoked.

Gunray spoke first. “The corpses were dumped into the sea—”

“—atomized,” Haako said at the same time.

Maul showed each of them a withering glance. “Which is it—dumped or atomized?”

“Atomized, then dumped into the sea,” Gunray said, proud of himself.

Maul continued to glower at him. “You discarded atomized bodies.”

The air went out of Gunray for a moment; then he said: “The Gungans need not concern us.”

Maul folded his arms across his chest and bared his filed teeth. “Why is that, Viceroy?”

“The amphibians would not risk engaging our overwhelming force.”

Maul snorted. “The Gungans have a standing army thousands strong and strategic plasma weaponry.”

Gunray looked at Haako, who said, “We didn’t know—”

“Now you do.”

Maul watched the slimy duo shake in their robes. These were invaders? These were the leaders of an army? So easily cowed, so easily deceived, and covetous to the point that they had allowed themselves to be manipulated into instigating a war for a chance at increased profits. To them, wealth was an end unto itself. They had no understanding of real power, and seemingly no contact with the

Force. They had more in common with the battle droids that served them than they had with sentient beings. How Trezza would have laughed. Sometimes Maul lamented having had to kill the Falleen. But Trezza had learned too much about Maul's powers ...

"Who is supervising the search for the Gungan cities?" he said at last.

"Commander OOM-Nine," Gunray said.

"A droid," Maul said. "The predecessor of your inept B-Ones."

"A superior droid, Lord Maul," Haako was quick to point out. "Viceroy Gunray's personal guard."

Maul ignored him and spoke to Gunray. "Inform OOM-Nine that I am assuming command of the search."

\* \* \*

Maul demanded the most from the speeder bike as he left the plains and the Gallo Mountains behind and raced down through dense forest and into the swamplands to the south. Before leaving Theed he had communicated with Darth Sidious; he had reason to believe that the mistakes he'd made on Tatooine had been forgiven, and that his mission was back on track. With the Republic Senate in turmoil, Sidious was confident that he would be able to persuade Queen Amidala to return to Naboo, and he suspected that Qui-Gon Jinn and Obi-Wan Kenobi would accompany her. But Maul's excitement at the prospect of having a second go at them was dimmed by having to deal with the Gungans—business that had been entrusted to the Neimoidians. Surely Sidious knew that Gunray was incapable of doing what had been asked of him, and yet Sidious had kept vital information from the viceroy that would have enabled him to locate the underwater cities of the indigenes. Why, then, had Sidious provided the information to Maul now? Was this yet another in the series of tests his Master had put him through over the past five years to substantiate his loyalty and skill?

The question rode with him into the forward observation base OOM-9 had established on the shore of an insect-plagued marsh. The forest was tall here, and the slender trees seemed to grow from the fetid water itself. In a clearing, a full company of battle droids waited in precise ranks, augmented by a dozen droidekas. Other droids were scouting the marsh on Single Trooper Aerial

Platforms. Close to the shore hovered a clamshell-shaped aquatic destroyer equipped with arrays of short-range lasers and tank-like siege engines.

Maul was impressed. The scene at least had the appearance of a legitimate military exercise.

OOM-9 approached as he was dismounting the speeder bike. "Welcome, Commander," it said in a forthright way.

Its chest plastron emblazoned with yellow markings, OOM-9 boasted multiple antennae and a backpack that boosted its operational range. Maul knew that the droid had been tasked with spearheading the occupation and was credited with having razed Naboo communications centers at New Centrif and Vis, as well as having secured the cities of Harte Secur, Spinnaker, and Theed. From a captured mariner in Harte Secur, OOM-9 had learned of a Gungan bubble city called Rellias, but its forces had thus far been unable to locate the city.

"Viceroy Gunray said that you have already captured many Gungans," Maul said. "Exactly how many?"

The droid's processor hummed faintly as it communicated with computers aboard the orbiting control ship. "How many did the viceroy say we captured?" it asked in a grating monotone.

"Forty-seven," Maul told it.

"Yes, Commander. We captured forty-seven."

Maul frowned in exasperation, but forgave OOM-9 the lie. "Show me to them."

The droid pivoted through a half circle and turned its thin head back toward Maul. "This way, Commander."

A short winding trail through the trees led to a place where four Gungans were laid out on the ground, their cartilaginous bodies holed by blaster bolts. With their billed faces, floppy ears, stalked eyes, and lolling tongues, they certainly didn't look capable of waging war, but Sidious had warned Maul not to underestimate the species.

"These Gungans were apprehended while exchanging goods with Naboo traders outside the city of Moenia," OOM-9 explained.

"Where are the Naboo traders?"

"Confined in Detention Camp Six, Commander."

Maul took a moment to observe a STAP patrol buzzing overhead. "You've found no signs of Rellias?"

"None, Commander. It's possible that the Gungans have devices capable of foiling our penetrating scanners."

Maul considered it. However slight, there was a chance the Gungans were capable of doing something that could jeopardize his task of killing the Jedi and capturing the Queen, and he couldn't have that.

"This isn't the time for subtlety," he told OOM-9. "Poison the waters. If that doesn't bring the Gungans to the surface, then drain the marsh."

\* \* \*

Maul took the speeder bike out of the lowlands, following a twisting path that climbed back into the lush foothills of the Gallo range. Farms began to appear, with stately old houses set far back from the roadbed. Reasoning that revolt of any sort would likely begin in one of the cities, the Neimoidians hadn't sent their droids into the area. But clearly the Naboo farmers were aware of what had happened elsewhere, as many of the houses were abandoned, and agricultural machines sat silently in the midst of furrowed fields.

Eventually Maul located the place Sidious had told him to seek out. Posted where the roadbed intersected the lane that accessed the house, a sign written in Basic and Futhork read: SUMMIT FARM BLOSSOM WINERY. Maul waited at the sign. East and west of the lane as far as he could see spread field after field of cultivated plants, their vibrant flowers varying in color, size, and shape. The warm air was redolent with their heady fragrances. Maul swung the speeder bike over the lane and moved slowly toward the house. In some of the fields, Naboo men working alongside labor droids stopped what they were doing to watch him pass. One man set off in a run for the house, clearly to announce Maul's arrival.

The house was a well-cared-for building made of wood and stone, with a quaint peaked roof. Some distance from the house, two ancient windmills spun. In an outbuilding larger than the house, Maul could see extraction presses and wooden storage barrels. He had just brought the speeder to a halt when a short Naboo woman exited through the house's front door, wiping her hands on a work apron and appraising him openly. As sturdily built as her house, the woman had sharp features, piercing blue eyes, and close-cropped silver hair. The muscular worker who had tipped her off lingered behind, his posture indicating that he had a blaster tucked into the waistband of his pants, at the small of his back. Maul brought his left leg over the speeder's U-shaped saddle and stood for a moment, allowing the woman to study him while he peeled off his long black gloves and draped them over the steering bar.

"You've ridden a long way," she said. "You must be thirsty. Come inside."

She turned and walked back into the house. Her protector stepped away, allowing Maul to pass before following him inside. The interior was cool and dim and decorated with wooden furniture and other old things. The woman returned from a food preparation area and handed Maul a clear drink cooled by crushed ice. He took a small sip, testing it for poison, then drank the sweet liquid down in one long pull while the woman traded furtive glances with her bodyguard. With a nod of her pointed chin, she signaled the man to leave the room, but he didn't go far.

When Maul handed her the empty glass, she gestured to a couch.

"Sit down, won't you? And tell me what I can do for you."

Maul didn't move. "I need location coordinates for the principal Gungan cities."

She blinked in surprise. "Who told you I have information of that sort?"

"Do you or don't you?"

She narrowed her eyes in understanding and showed him a fleeting, tight-lipped smile. "I knew the Neimoidians couldn't have pulled off something like this on their own. How long have you been working with the Trade Federation?"

Maul glowered. "The Gungan cities."

“I’m afraid you’ve come all this way for nothing.” Seeing the fire in Maul’s yellow eyes, she quickly added: “Now, hold on a moment. Just because I don’t know the coordinates, doesn’t mean I don’t know someone who does.”

“Who?” Maul snapped.

She sat down on the couch. “First things first. Just how much do you know about me—or think you know?”

Maul stood over her. “Your name is Magneta. You were chief of security for the former King.”

She forced a short exhale. “I’d ask your name, but I’m sure it wouldn’t mean anything to me.”

Maul went on. “Before the election of Queen Amidala, the King was planning to tap additional plasma reservoirs in the Gungan areas. He contracted with an offworld mining company to do the surveys, and was prepared to go to war with the Gungans if they resisted. He abdicated the throne before putting the plan into action.”

“Abdicated,” Magneta said, drawing out the word. “A curious way to put it. Do you know how King Veruna died?”

Maul fought to control his impatience. “I don’t know and I don’t care.”

She studied his face. “Odd. When you rode up, I immediately figured you for the assassin we could never locate.”

Maul snorted. “You figured wrong. Who knows the location of the underwater cities?”

Magneta sighed. “All right, have it your way. You’ll want to talk to a Bothan named Leika. He’s chief surveyor for the company King Veruna hired. But I’m not sure where he can be found. I’ve tried to keep an ear to the ground, but from here there’s only so much I’m able to learn. Leika was preparing to leave Naboo when the Neimoidians sprang their surprise blockade. He tried to reason with them, but as with many other offworlders, he wasn’t permitted to leave. No ships in or out, no exceptions. He was in Moenia when the invasion occurred,

and no doubt he was caught up in it. So the first place I'd look would be in the closest detention camps."

Maul turned and headed for the door. He was about to go through it when Magneta said: "Be sure to give my regards to the Muun."

Maul stopped and swung slowly around. "What Muun?"

"Hego Damask."

He shook his head. "I don't know the name."

Magneta tipped her head to one side in suspicion. "I find that very unlikely, since I'm certain that Hego Damask and his puppet—Naboo's illustrious Senator Palpatine—have their arms to the elbows in this invasion and occupation."

Maul betrayed no surprise, even at the mention of his Master's alias. "Who is Hego Damask?"

"Who is ...?" Magneta ran her eyes over his mask of a face. "You actually don't know? Damask is a mobster masquerading as a banker. It was Damask who brokered the original deal to have Naboo's plasma mined and shipped by the Trade Federation. I suspect he's also the one behind Palpatine's campaign for the chancellorship. They've been in collusion for over two decades."

Maul was secretly stunned. He knew the names of some of Palpatine's cohorts—Sate Pestage, Kinman Dorian, and others—but the name Hego Damask was new to him, as was Magneta's assertion that the Muun was in some way controlling Palpatine. Was it possible that Darth Sidious himself had a clandestine Master? The idea was too far-fetched to contemplate, let alone accept.

"Ah, so I have touched on something," Magneta said, watching him closely. "Then you might as well know the rest: There's good reason to believe that Damask and Palpatine were the ones responsible for King Veruna's death. They needed to install pretty little Amidala on the throne so they could take full control of the planet, while making it seem as if the Trade Federation were responsible."

She paused, then added: "Palpatine double-crossed me, even after I allowed his agent, Pestage, to get away with the murder of more than a dozen pro-Gungan

Naboo.” She gestured broadly. “Instead of being taken into the fold, I end up here, in humiliated self-exile for failing to save Veruna’s life.”

Maul knew something about humiliation. But Magneta had gone too far in airing her grievances, however justified. Palpatine could not be suspected of being tied to the Neimoidians or to the invasion of Naboo.

Maul heard Magneta’s bodyguard move, and Magneta, too—going for a hold-out blaster concealed beneath her apron. Maul was also aware that several field workers were gathered just outside the door, waiting to spring an ambush.

Snarling, he whirled, moving faster than human eyes could follow, breaking Magneta’s neck with the edge of his hand, then spinning again to send his stiffened right foot into the chest of the bodyguard as he rushed into the room. A hail of blaster bolts came through the front door.

Dodging them, Maul ran across the room and dived headfirst through a window, somersaulting in midair so that he hit the ground on his feet, now centered among his astonished opponents.

Growling, he clenched his bare hands and set on them, killing one after another.

\* \* \*

Battle droids stationed at the perimeter of Detention Camp Six, outside Moenia, brandished their blaster rifles as Maul sped into their midst on the speeder bike. He was a split second from cutting them to pieces when their recognition programs kicked in and they assumed postures of salute.

“Welcome, Commander Maul,” their officer intoned. “What are your orders?”

Shoving past them, Maul crossed a footbridge that spanned a foul-smelling trench and entered a compound of hastily erected dormitories and flat-roofed dining halls. The area had been recently deforested, and Naboo’s sun beat down on the muddy ground. The relocated population of nearby Moenia was largely made up of artists, merchants, and Gungan sympathizers. Maul supposed that they were more accustomed to simple living than their counterparts in cosmopolitan Theed, who had never known privation, but they were an unhappy lot just the same. A droid administrator found the name Leika among the list of detainees, and a security droid escorted Maul to a dormitory the Bothan



surveyor shared with twenty Naboo actors, a Rodian wilderness guide, and two Bith musicians.

A broad-nosed and bearded being of medium height, Leika went rigid with fright on seeing Maul enter the room and made straight for the cot he shared with one of the Naboo.

Maul stood akimbo at the foot of the cot. "Gather your belongings and follow me outside."

"I—"

"Now!"

Over his hirsute shoulders the Bothan slung two small backpacks and hurried after Maul, who ushered him into an unoccupied storage building and closed the door behind them.

"I didn't mean to be a bother to the viceroy," Leika said in apology. "I was merely requesting permission to leave Naboo—"

"That doesn't concern me."

The Bothan frowned in confusion. "You are the Neimoidians' executioner, are you not?"

"That depends on how much information you can provide regarding the location of the Gungan cities," Maul said.

Leika's eyes widened in surprise, then narrowed with clear purpose. "If you can get me off Naboo, I'll provide whatever information you require."

Maul glanced at the backpacks. "First show me what you have, then I'll give thought to your predicament."

The Bothan dug into the smaller of the packs and fished out a projection crystal, which he inserted into a reader and set atop a storage container. Activated, the reader projected a 3-D map of Naboo's swamplands and lakes.

“It took me more than a year to assemble these data,” Leika said. “I should have abandoned the project when King Veruna died, but I was so obsessed with unraveling the mystery of the Gungan cities, I couldn’t bring myself to stop. I was beginning to make real progress when the Trade Federation announced its blockade, and most of my informants went to ground.”

“Rellias,” Maul said. “Begin with that.”

Leika made adjustments to the crystal reader, and a new 3-D map came into view. He pointed to a data entry that accompanied shifting views of a dense cluster of hydrostatic bubbles that made up the underwater city of Rellias.

“Here are the location coordinates.” His furry hand moved. “The bubbles are permeable at certain points, and emit a natural glow that derives from the interaction between plasma and energy generated electromagnetically.”

“The name of the governor of Rellias,” Maul said.

“Boss,” Leika amended. “Boss Ganne. An Ankura Gungan—the ones with green skin and hooded eyes.”

Maul filed the name away. “How far to the bubble city closest to Rellias?”

Leika rocked his head back and forth. “Hard to say. Several of my sources confirmed that there is a fortified underwater plasma channel, somewhere in this area”—his forefinger drew a circle in the air—“that eventually leads to Otoh Gunga, Langua, Jahai, and the rest, which I believe to be in Lake Paonga, close to where it merges with the Lianorm Swamp. Otoh Gunga is the capital, if you will, and home to the Rep Council and the high ruler, Boss Rugor Nass. There is said to be a second approach to Otoh Gunga from the north, from a site called the Sacred Place.”

Maul turned away from the projected map to regard Leika. “The Sacred Place?”

The Bothan shrugged. “No one I spoke with knew why it’s called that, or precisely where it is.” He paused for a moment. “Are you ... planning to attack the cities? I only ask because I feel compelled to warn you that the Gungans are well armed. Their standing army is what kept King Veruna from attacking them, and in part the impetus for his creating the Naboo Royal Space Fighter Corps. That, and to counter the strength of the Trade Federation.”

“And to counter the power of the Muun, Hego Damask,” Maul said, dangling the name.

If Leika was surprised, he kept it to himself. “Well, Magister Damask, of course. He controls all of it. Even the coming election on Coruscant.”

“Damask will put Senator Palpatine in power?” Maul asked carefully.

“Naboo’s favorite son?” Leika laughed shortly. “Hasn’t Damask already done so?”

Maul didn’t want to hear any more about it. Snatching the data crystal and reader, he threw open the door and stepped into the light. Glancing at Leika, he said: “The terms will be honored.”

As he made his way out of the detention camp he thought about Darth Sidious, and it occurred to him to wonder if the terms of their agreement would be honored.

\* \* \*

By the time Maul returned to OOM-9’s forward observation base, the dark waters of the marshland were clotted with poisoned gooberfish, and a stench hung in the humid air. The water level was lower, but not nearly as low as Maul had expected.

“As quickly as we drain it, the marsh replenishes itself, Commander,” the droid told him. “The marsh and the lakes beyond appear to be linked to vast reserves of underground water.”

Maul handed the data crystal to OOM-9. “The location coordinates for Rellias can be accessed from the menu. Transmit the data to your STAP patrols and order them to saturate the location with depth charges. Then prepare the S-DST for immediate embarkation and meet me on board.”

The droid accepted the crystal and hurried off.

Carrying half the company of droid troopers and the full contingent of droidekas, the aquatic destroyer hovered through a maze of channels shaded by thriving

forest. By midafternoon it had maneuvered its way into a twisting passage that provided a link between the marsh and an enormous clear-water lake. Far to the west, two fingers of land jutted into the lake, forming a strait. Standing in the destroyer's curved bow, Maul could see the STAPs buzzing back and forth beyond the narrows, raining explosives on the water. As the muffled reports of the depth charges reached him, he tried to compose himself for battle, but a welter of thoughts kept him from clearing his mind entirely.

Years earlier, on the same day Maul had been ordered to execute everyone at Trezza's combat training center on Orsis, Darth Sidious had revealed that he was a Sith Lord. Before that, Maul had had no idea why or for what purpose he was being trained in the ways of the Force and in the dark side. Following the massacre, Darth Sidious had revealed more information about the Sith, including the fact that, for a millennium, there had never been more than two true Sith in any one era, a Master and an apprentice. Allegedly. Now, in the wake of the revelations about his Master's possible alliance with Hego Damask, Maul asked himself: Had Sidious ever described himself as the only surviving Sith Master? Was it possible that this mysterious Muun, Hego Damask, was also a Sith Lord, and that Maul—while given the title lord by Sidious—was in fact something less than a true Sith? Was that why, unlike Sidious, he had never been granted a secret identity comparable to his Master's guise as Palpatine? Was Maul, then, ultimately expendable to the Sith Grand Plan—a mere stealth agent and assassin?

Enough thinking! he told himself.

Simply all the more reason to prove himself to his Master—or possibly Masters. To demonstrate his worthiness so that he might be seen as a true Sith.

With the S-DST approaching the straits, Maul saw that stone fortifications had been erected on both fingers of land, and that from behind those bulwarks, spheres of faintly blue energy were being lobbed into the sky, decimating the STAP patrols. As the destroyer drew closer to the sandy shore, hundreds of orange- and purple-skinned Otolla Gungans appeared at the top of the walls, armed with energy lances and so-called plasmic boomers that could be hurled from baskets worn over one hand. Surfacing from the suddenly turbulent waters came a fleet of organically grown submersibles, whose weapons began to target the destroyer with orbs of destructive power.

The S-DST beached itself so that the droid troopers and droidekas could disembark. Rushing in to meet the hovercraft came a cavalry force made up of Gungans seated on two-legged wingless reptavians adorned with war feathers. Leading the charge were two green-skinned Ankura whom Maul assumed were Boss Ganne and his general. From the rear flew energy orbs launched from catapults strapped to the backs of beasts, whose sonorous calls reverberated across the lake. Battle droids marched out to face them, firing their E-5s continuously, and bolstered by the droidekas that wheeled toward the yelping riders, stopping only to fire from behind their individual deflector shields.

Maul leapt ashore. The horizontal hail of fire from the battle droids and the droidekas heated the air and conjured a breeze. STAPs fell from the sky like stones, and the energy spheres fountained water and dirt high into the air.

In planning his attack on the Orsis training camp, he had initially decided that his first kill should be Trezza. The Falleen had to be taken out while Maul was at the peak of his strength. Then the rest of the trainers and trainees could be seen to. But Maul hadn't stood by his decision, undermined by reluctance to kill the being who had in many ways been his only flesh-and-blood caregiver. As a consequence, he had come close to losing to Trezza when they had finally joined in hand-to-hand combat. Maul had promised himself that he wouldn't make the same mistake twice. Mistakes were part of the past—mere lessons like those he had learned on Tatooine—and he knew what had to be done now.

Maul gazed into the sky, where only a few STAPs remained. The aerial platforms answered solely to their droid pilots, but he thought of a way to make use of them. Summoning one, Maul launched himself into the air with a Force jump as the STAP soared overhead. Dangling from the platform's starboard footrest with one hand, he called his lightsaber to the other, and ignited its blades.

Some of the Gungan riders saw him coming and took aim. Maul twisted his body, either evading flights of energy lances and spheres or fending them off with the lightsaber. Letting go of the STAP when he was still twenty meters from Ganne and the general, he called on the Force to send himself tearing through a score of mounted Gungans. It was clear that they had never seen anything like him. But then, who had? What Sith in the past thousand years had been allowed to wield a lightsaber in open battle? Was that in itself not enough to qualify him as a true Sith?

The rubbery Gungans all but disintegrated at the touch of the twin blades Maul had hoped to reserve for the Jedi. Their billed heads flew in all directions. His slashes halved them down the middle or through the midsection, and they squawked as they died. Their nostrils flared and their eyes bulged from their heads, and the white sand beach grew puddled with their blood. Maul maneuvered closer to Ganne, cutting the legs out from under the Gungans' mounts or impaling them on his lightsaber.

He launched himself into the air when he was still five meters from the Boss and the general. The latter lost his head to one of the blades, and Ganne was knocked from his mount by Maul's extended left hand. Agile despite his girth, the Gungan Boss clambered to his feet and scrambled for his electropole, but Maul was on him before he could use the weapon, disarming him and hauling him by his long ears through the chaos of the melee, into the tree line that defined the edge of the battlefield.

The Gungan's hooded eyes rolled around in his head, and spittle drooled from his thick lips. Maul brought the lightsaber close to Ganne's face, but then deactivated it. This weak-willed primitive didn't need to be threatened, he told himself. He simply needed to be manipulated into revealing the truth.

"The route to Otoh Gunga," Maul said, motioning meaningfully with his gloved hand.

Responding to the Force suggestion, Ganne's eyes grew even blanker. "Yousa needen to be knowen desa ways to Otoh Gunga," he said in the Gungan's pidgin tongue.

"Tell me," Maul said.

"Mesa tell yousa. Yousa take yous mackineeks through da Rellias Straits."

Maul yanked Ganne's ears behind his head. "You'll open the gates when we arrive."

"Mesa open dissa gates when wesa riven."

Satisfaction and loathing mixed in Maul's malicious grin. Hauling Ganne to his three-toed feet, he began dragging him toward Trade Federation lines.

\* \* \*

Information provided by the obedient but confused Gungan Boss allowed the Trade Federation S-DST to maneuver safely through the treacherous Rellias Straits and into the much larger Lake Paonga. No sooner did it arrive than parties of Gungan warriors began to appear on the shores to bombard the hovercraft with plasma boomers. Maul put a quick end to the attacks by securing Boss Ganne to the craft's curved bow. The sight of Ganne made to serve as a figurehead gave the warriors pause, and for the remainder of the journey to Otoh Gunga, the Gungans did little more than brandish their electropoles and give voice to war cries.

With the STAPs annihilated, OOM-9 commanded the battle droids to sow the lake with depth charges, some of which touched off underwater explosions that transformed the formerly placid lake into an expanse of frothing turmoil. But no Gungan bodies were observed among the objects the explosions brought to the surface. Even before OOM-9's drone submersibles returned from their scouting missions, Maul realized that word of the invasion and fall of Rellias had spread quickly to Otoh Gunga, and the city had been evacuated. Gazing north over the chaotic waters, he asked himself where Boss Rugor Nass could be hiding. Then he stormed to the bow of the hovercraft to haul a sodden Boss Ganne onto the forward deck.

Motioning again with one hand, Maul interrogated him. This time, however, consternation warped the features of the Gungan's broad face. Even if Ganne wanted to divulge the answers, something inside him was battling the compulsion to betray the Gungans' most deeply held secret.

Maul snorted. Maybe not so primitive, after all.

And from his cummerbund he drew the lightsaber and thumbed it to life.

Ganne's disclosures came slowly and painfully, but not without honor.

OOM-9 waited until Maul had rolled the Gungan's blistered body into the water to say: "Commander, Viceroy Gunray wishes you to be informed that a holotransmission has been received from Coruscant. Queen Amidala and the Jedi are on their way to Naboo."

\* \* \*

Maul raced back to Theed, riding low and cutting a livid swath through the grasslands. Gunray and Haako had secreted themselves in the Palace throne room, but the security droids snapped to attention on seeing Maul and allowed him to enter. Instead of being grateful to Darth Sidious for having persuaded Queen Amidala to return to Naboo, the Neimoidians were rueful—sorrier than ever to have been drawn into a conspiracy with a Sith Lord. Maul knew that they would change their tune once the Queen ceded control of Naboo to the Trade Federation, but they lacked vision. Maul had to chase them from the throne room and out into Theed's deserted central plaza, where he began to advise them on how to prepare for Amidala's homecoming.

"You can start by stationing more droids around the Palace," he said, "and ordering the patrols to sweep the area every five minutes instead of every fifteen."

Haako tried to argue that Theed would be better protected if the patrols were widely dispersed, but Maul refused to sanction it. "You may think you have everyone rounded up in the camps, but you're wrong. Some of Amidala's security forces surrendered without resistance, but the rest are at large"—Maul gestured broadly—"hiding in the countryside, waiting for a signal that will recall them to Theed."

"A signal?" Gunray said. "That's not possible."

Maul suppressed an urge to wring the viceroy's neck. "What's impossible is your luck in occupying this planet despite your bungling. Do you expect Amidala to simply sit down with you two and work out the terms of her surrender?"

"Isn't that why she is returning?" Gunray said.

Maul's hands clenched in fists of rage. "She's returning to run you out of the Palace and send your ships scampering toward Neimoidia!"

Gunray stiffened in panic. "Sweep the plaza every five minutes!" he instructed one of the officer droids.

"Maintain constant surveillance," Maul said, "using all spectrums. And increase security at all the detention camps."



Gunray had just repeated the commands when his comlink chimed.

Maul nodded for him to acknowledge the transmission.

OOM-9's metallic monotone issued from the comlink's small speaker. "Viceroy, the Droid Control Ship tracked the course of Queen Amidala's starship. Only moments ago one of our patrols found it in the swamps."

Delight shone in Gunray's eyes. "Have you arrested her?"

"Negative, Viceroy. Like the Gungan city of Otoh Gunga, the starship was abandoned."

A faint shriek escaped Gunray.

Maul regarded him with loathing. "The Queen and the Jedi have returned. And somewhere in the swamps, I suspect that the Gungans are gathering their Grand Army." He smiled wickedly. "You may yet have an actual war on your hands, Viceroy. You had better be prepared to fight every bit as hard as the natives will."

"Find the Queen!" Gunray barked into the comlink. "Make it your top priority to arrest her!"

At the end of his rope, Maul snatched the comlink from Gunray's trembling grasp and deactivated it. "Enough of your bumbling. I need to inform Lord Sidious of our situation."

\* \* \*

In the hangar where the Sith Infiltrator was docked, Maul used his wrist link to re-task the probe droids. Less than a day had passed since he had been in Theed, but in that short time the situation had been upended.

Darth Sidious had been informed that the Queen's starship had been found abandoned in the vast Lianorm Swamp. Gunray had tried to assure Sidious that Amidala and the Jedi would soon be located, but Sidious knew better. The fact that Amidala had unexpectedly set the ship down in the swamps had provided Sidious a clue as to her motives. The Sith Lord had instructed Maul to be mindful, and to let the Jedi make the first move.

Soon after, OOM-9 confirmed Sidious's suspicions that Amidala and the Gungans were assembling an army.

In a subsequent holotransmission, Sidious had made it plain to Maul that the Jedi, bound by their oaths to the Order, could not take sides. The most they could do was protect the Queen.

With the Neimoidians present during the follow-up communication, Maul had had to read between the lines of what his Master was saying. When Sidious said that the Queen's foolish actions had surprised him, Maul understood that he was exaggerating. His Master wouldn't have persuaded or allowed Amidala to return to Naboo unless he had known in advance that she would attempt to enlist the Gungans in her cause to win back the planet. Obviously, Darth Sidious favored the idea of a grand battle. Open rebellion would justify the actions of the Trade Federation in fighting back. More important, Sidious had granted Gunray permission to kill the Queen and as many Gungans as he deemed necessary to secure victory. The pretense of a peace treaty was no longer necessary.

Sidious had dismissed Maul's concern that the Jedi might be using the Queen for their own purposes, but Maul wasn't yet convinced that wasn't the case. If the Jedi weren't permitted to fight alongside Amidala, why had they returned? If their purpose was to draw Maul out, then someone had to have apprised them that Maul was on Naboo, and the only being who could have done that was Darth Sidious.

Sidious was as eager to encourage a battle between the Trade Federation and the Gungans as he was an ultimate contest between Maul and the Jedi. He wanted to be assured that his apprentice had what it took to be a true Sith.

Maul programmed a series of coordinates into the probe droids and let them fly. Then he climbed aboard the speeder bike to follow them.

There was only one site where Amidala, the Jedi, and the Gungans could be plotting their counteroffensive.

The so-called Sacred Place at the northern end of Paonga Strait, in the swampy basins of the Gallo Mountains.

\* \* \*

Not since whatever elder race had built and once occupied the Sacred Place had it played host to as many sentients and droids. Not merely the Gungans from Otoh Gunga and other bubble cities, and Amidala, her retinue, and the Jedi, but also OOM-9's squadrons of STAPs, searching in all the wrong places, and the droid commander's long-range reconnaissance platoons of battle droids, many of which had become mired in the soft ground. For a change, Maul found something to appreciate in the incompetence of the Neimoidians' army, for it served his purpose.

He sat crouched in a shallow waterway a couple of kilometers south of where the Gungans and the rest had gathered, his presence in the Force deliberately diminished and his wrist link pressed close to his ear, tuned to the frequency used by the probe droids he had sent ahead as listening devices. Filtered by the forest's leafy canopy, the ambient light was almost aquatic. Around him in all directions rose the ruins of grand stone buildings fronted with hieroglyphic stairways, raised agricultural fields, columned temples, and carved statuary—all of it being slowly disassembled by the roots of massive trees whose seeds had sprouted in the grooves between building blocks and in crevices in the flat stones that paved the plazas.

Since the start of his eavesdropping, Amidala and Boss Rugor Nass had cemented their alliance. Responding to a covert signal, several dozen members of the underground had streamed into the ruins, and the Queen's chief security officer, Panaka, had returned from a scouting mission in Theed. Maul wasn't surprised that Panaka had been able to infiltrate the city despite increased security—anyone schooled in military tactics could have done so simply by spending a few moments observing the routines of the battle droids, and then working around them.

Maul hadn't bothered pointing out the weaknesses to Gunray, because he now wanted the Neimoidians to fail, despite his Master's plan.

But the Gungan force was not without its weaknesses.

Amidala's plan called for the use of the Grand Army as a diversion to draw battle droids from Theed to engage the Gungans on the grassy plains. At the same time, she and her elite team would penetrate the Theed Palace and capture Gunray. The Queen was correct in assuming that the droid army would collapse without sentient leadership, but she was mistaken in her belief that Gunray

would have to shunt battle droids from Theed. Clearly she had no real awareness of the size of the Neimoidian army. Amidala's only shot at victory rested with the pilots of the Naboo Space Fighter Corps, who would have to take the fight to the Droid Control Ship in stationary orbit above the planet.

But Maul was left to wonder how Qui-Gon Jinn and Obi-Wan Kenobi figured into Amidala's plan, since they were supposedly not allowed to intervene in the battle. Certainly they would accompany Amidala into Theed, but would they remain by her side while she attempted to slip into the Palace?

Maul wondered, too, to what degree his Master would want him to intercede. Was he obliged to notify Gunray of Amidala's plans? Should he attempt to lure the Gungans into a slaughter in Theed? There was still time to sabotage the berthed N-1 starfighters he had found in Theed's main hangar ...

This will work to our advantage, Darth Sidious had said on learning of the Queen's ploy to ally with the Gungans.

Did Sidious mean to his and Maul's advantage, or to Sidious and Hego Damask's advantage? If Sidious and the Muun had designs on Naboo, then the greater the carnage the greater the sympathy for Senator Palpatine in the coming election. Whatever the reasons, Maul's task remained as before: to kill two Jedi. The rest of it—the blockade, the invasion, the counteroffensive—was nothing more than theater. So what if the Trade Federation lost its army and ten thousand Gungans died? Who cared, after all, about Naboo or its young Queen?

The real war was, as ever, between the Sith and the Jedi.

The deaths of Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan would send a message to the Jedi Council that the Sith had returned and the days of the Order were numbered.

\* \* \*

Maul decided that if he never saw Naboo's grasslands again it would be too soon. But the long ride back to Theed—made all the more circuitous because of Gungans perched in the treetops with macrobinoculars—gave him time to formulate a plan of his own.

He took the speeder bike directly to the hangar, where close to four hundred B1 droids were patrolling the area. That was far too many to be easily defeated by

Amidala and her handful of security officers and pilots. With help from the Jedi it was possible that the Naboo could eventually overcome the battle droids, but Maul wanted to ensure that Amidala's small force would be able to move on to the Palace without encountering too much resistance. More important, he didn't want Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan worrying too much about her safety.

In the small plaza that fronted the hangar he searched out the droid in charge of security.

"What are your orders, Commander?" the droid said.

"Redeploy your troopers," Maul told it. "Leave sixty droids to defend the hangar and send the rest to reinforce the platoons safeguarding the Palace."

The droid took a moment to process the change in orders, though it was the control ship computer that asked: "Will that not leave the space force hangar vulnerable to attack, Commander?"

"I will personally make up for the reduced count."

That seemed to satisfy the commander, and it lifted its arm in salute. "Copy, copy."

Instantly, and without a word, droids began to gather in the plaza, where they fell into formation and marched off in the direction of the Palace. Maul watched them go, then hurried into the cavernous building. There he spent a short time imagining Amidala's arrival, the ensuing firefight, the starfighter pilots racing for their astromech-outfitted ships and launching out over the escarpment, the Queen and Panaka setting out for the Palace ...

Maul's gaze swept the hangar's broad entrance. A tunnel linked the hangar to the Palace, but Amidala would certainly assume that it had been booby-trapped, and would likely lead the Jedi and her infiltration team across the eastern fork of the Solleu River and through the narrow paths and across the skybridges of the Vis district. But a lightsaber duel fought along that route or in the woods that surrounded the Palace would be difficult to control. Somehow he had to waylay the Jedi before they exited the building. Again he scanned the dim interior, and his gaze fell on the tall blast doors that separated the hangar from the contiguous power generator building. On his earlier visit to the hangar he had

done little more than peer into the plasma power station, but now, eager to know what lay beyond the blast doors, he hurried through them.

A short walk took him to the edge of a curved inspection platform flanked by circular engineering consoles. A catwalk extended from the platform across a deep and wide circular extraction shaft studded with towering acceleration columns, within which plasma energy was intensified before refinement and storage. The flashing columns were linked at various levels by service catwalks no wider than the central walkway, which terminated at a narrow door on the far side of the shaft. Maul paced halfway to the door, then returned to the inspection platform and paced it a second time, marking the length and calculating the distances between it and the catwalks above and below. Several times he leapt to higher or lower catwalks. Once he had committed the arrangement to both mental and muscle memory, he walked all the way to the far door and through it.

The door opened on a soaring security hallway, interrupted at regular intervals by laser gates that sealed themselves in response to power outputs of the plasma activation process. Initially the firings seemed to occur randomly, but after he passed through the gates several times in both directions—cautiously at first, then as quickly as he could—Maul began to discern a subtle pattern. The pattern was by no means foolproof, and twice he came close to being fried by the firings, but in the end he had learned enough about the timing of the gates to provide himself with a slight advantage.

Beyond the final gate, the walkway broadened to encircle a narrow-mouthed plasma slough core of indeterminable depth. In an upper-tier maintenance station he found a hydrospanner and dropped it into the core.

If indeed the heavy tool hit bottom, the noise never reached him.

Maul paced the circular rim of the core, gazing down into the blackness; then he turned from the view to imagine and direct how the lightsaber duel would unfold. He would use the laser gates to separate the Jedi. He looked around. Yes: he would kill one of them just there. As for the other ...

Well, he'd allow himself a surprise or two.

Confident that his actions would please his Master, he raced to the Palace to await word that Queen Amidala and the Jedi had entered the city.

\* \* \*

A short time later, in the depths of the power generator, Maul had savored the pained surprise in Qui-Gon's blue-gray eyes as the crimson blade ran him through. Now he paced the rim of the slough core, dragging the blade of his sundered lightsaber along the impervious metal. A dark side anointment, sparks showered down on Obi-Wan Kenobi, who dangled two meters below, with both hands clenched around a nozzle that projected from the core's inner wall.

Sweat dripped from Maul's fearsome face, and hatred radiated from his yellow eyes. He snarled at the young Jedi with the long Padawan braid, but Obi-Wan wouldn't give him the satisfaction of looking at him, or acknowledging his death at the hands of a superior opponent.

In the split second it took Maul to realize that Obi-Wan was actually gazing at Qui-Gon's lightsaber—where it had come to a rest on the inspection platform—and that Maul had sabotaged himself by drawing out his moment of victory, Obi-Wan leapt straight out of the core and somersaulted in midair, so that he was facing Maul when he landed behind him, with Qui-Gon's Force-summoned weapon in his hand.

As the green blade went through him, bisecting him at the hips, Maul had a fleeting memory of his life on Orsis, and of performing the same feat Obi-Wan just had, the first time he had used the Force among beings others than his Master.

The power of the dark side had played a cruel trick on him. And that it had, said it all.

Sidious is rid of another problem, for I am not yet a true Sith.

Cut in two and falling, Maul thought: If I had it to do over again, I would keep that fact foremost in mind.

But he was determined to be more lenient with himself than Darth Sidious would be. He would survive his defeat, and grant himself yet another second chance.

# RETURN OF THE SITH

32 B.B.Y.

Author: Obi-Wan Kenobi

*It is five days since the death of my Master. At the request of the Jedi Council, I make this report of my encounters with the Sith.*

*The first encounter was on Tatooine. My Master, Qui-Gon Jinn, and I were escorting Queen Amidala from Naboo to Coruscant when the hyperdrive of the Queen's starship became damaged and we were forced to land on the desert planet. Repairs had just been completed as Qui-Gon was returning to our landing site from the city of Mos Espa. He brought with him the Force-sensitive boy he'd discovered, Anakin Skywalker.*

*According to Qui-Gon, they were within sight of the ship when a black-clad figure came racing out from the dunes on a repulsorlift speeder. The figure leapt from his speeder, ignited a lightsaber, and attacked, but Qui-Gon managed to instruct Anakin to run for the ship. I was inside the ship's cockpit when the Queen's security head, Captain Panaka, came running in with Anakin. It disturbs me to realize that I hadn't sensed even the slightest danger before Panaka's alert.*

*Outside the cockpit viewport, I saw Qui-Gon fighting the dark figure. I directed the ship's captain to fly toward Qui-Gon, who was able to leap on board before we ascended from the planet, leaving the attacker behind. Qui-Gon was winded, but was compelled to note that his opponent was well trained in the Jedi arts.*

*When Qui-Gon and I next saw this enemy, we were assisting in the defense of Naboo against the Trade Federation's droid armies. Close up, he resembled a male Zabrak, but his face was so completely covered with black and red markings that identification was difficult. He used a double-bladed lightsaber and moved incredibly fast. Just as I sensed that the creature was aware that Qui-Gon and I would beat him, he found a way to divide us. Moments later, we were separated by laser doors in a security hallway. I could do nothing but watch as our enemy struck down Qui-Gon.*

*When the last laser door lifted, I gave in to my anger as I charged the dark warrior. I absolutely wanted to destroy him. He used my anger against me, actually fed off my fury, gaining strength as I exhausted my own. I lost my lightsaber and he had me. But then I saw my Master's weapon, and as I reached out for it, I heard Qui-Gon's words within me . . .*

*Be mindful of the living Force.*

*The Force guided my movements, and it was by Qui-Gon's blade that his killer was felled.*

*Whether our adversary was stalking us or attempting to assassinate the Queen, we may never know. He was certainly a Sith, but was he Master or apprentice? I believe it is only a matter of time before we find out. Anticipating a future encounter, I am compelled to remind all Jedi of what they have been told since their earliest training: do not lose yourselves to anger, even briefly as I did, for not only is this against our Code, but it will make the enemy stronger.*



## ENTRY: 9 ○

We are back on Coruscant. A Senator called Palpatine has been made Supreme Chancellor. Obi-Wan is now a Jedi Knight and I am going to be his Padawan Learner! I will try to be the very best Jedi ever!

### Saesee Tiin Recording

*Greetings, Master Yoda. The vehicle that delivered the Sith Lord to Naboo has been secured. It does not surprise me that the ship was designed to kill intruders, but given its contents, it seems strange that it did not self-destruct when its owner failed to return.*

*The ship's exterior bears a striking resemblance to an experimental Sienar Design Systems armed star courier, but every aspect of the vessel is either heavily modified or prototypical. It is equipped with a built-in cloaking device, and I've confirmed that the device is fueled by stygium crystals. Various weapons and devices indicate Sith technology.*

*All the ship's records have been wiped clean. I have found nothing to identify the Sith Lord slain by Obi-Wan. Although I have disabled the ship's weapons, I am compelled to say that it still poses a great danger, and I recommend that this vessel be placed in the Jedi Council's care.*

*That ship is alive with the dark side, Master Yoda. I can feel it clinging to my robes. And worse, it still tempts me, calling me back with promises of fantastic journeys to the far reaches of the galaxy.*

# THE CONVERSION OF COUNT DOOKU

**W**hen the Jedi Master Count Dooku renounced the Jedi Order in 32 B.B.Y., he made a brief official statement, which is preserved on the Great Holocron:

*For many years, I have served the Jedi Order and done my best to honor the traditions of the Jedi. Today I am compelled to announce that I am leaving the Order.*

*It is not unreasonable for anyone to wonder why I have decided to leave at this time. Yes, I am aware of various allegedly discreet queries from those searching for a reason. The recent, tragic loss of my former pupil, Qui-Gon Jinn? The debacle on Baltizaar? My highly publicized criticisms of an increasingly corrupt Senate? Some of my contemporaries have suggested that seeds of discontent were planted twelve years ago, at the Battle of Galidraan. While I cannot deny that these events have left their mark on me, I will only allow that the time has come that I can no longer be a Jedi.*

*As most of you are aware, financial resources are at my disposal on my homeworld, Serenno. While I would like to think my many years of devoted service to the Order disavows any notions that I am yielding to economic circumstances, I will enlighten those who don't know me so well with a certain piece of wisdom that I have always found true: money creates as many problems as it does opportunities.*

*It is my plan to return to Serenno and serve my people as a philanthropist. It is my last request as a Jedi Master that you respect my decision, as well as my privacy.*

*Good-bye, old friends, and may the Force be with you.*

Following Count Dooku's announcement, the recently elected Supreme Chancellor Palpatine sent the following message to the Jedi Council:

*Forgive me, members of the Council, for I fear I may be overstepping the boundaries of proper protocol. I have learned that Jedi Master Dooku intends to leave the Jedi Order. I only wish to express that I am saddened to learn of his decision, and hope that his departure is not a painful one. I regret I only met him a few times, but certainly knew his reputation and even admired him, even if I didn't entirely agree with his criticisms of the Senate. Because Dooku has become something of a public figure, I've been asked by a media representative for a comment on his announcement, but I think it may be best if I make no comment. I don't know if there is anything my office can do to help the Order at this time, but please know that I'd be happy to do whatever I can.*

## **Bounty Hunter**

Aboard his Solar Sailor, floating in the depths of space, Count Dooku receives a holomessage from his new master, Darth Sidious. The Sith Lord has become concerned about the Bando Gora, a fanatic cult that's attacking industrial interests across the galaxy. This cult is led by none other than Dooku's last Padawan Learner, the now berserk darksider Komari Vosa. She threatens the Sith master plan, so Dooku is tasked to wipe her and the cult out. And while he's at it, Sidious wants Dooku to find a genetic donor for the planned Clone Army Sidious' scheme requires. He suggests Dooku look amongst the deadliest, most brutal mercenaries in the cosmos. Dooku agrees and decides to kill two mynocks with one stone...

Outland Station, a distant outpost where beast fights are the pastime. Up in the rafters of the beast arena, a Muttani named Meeko Ghintee guides his chosen beast to victory via a cranial implant. Suddenly, a figure in blue-and-gray True Mandalorian armor appears behind him. Jango Fett has arrived to claim the bounty on Meeko.

The criminal panics and falls into the pit arena floor, with Fett in hot pursuit. Meeko guides his red borhek into Jango's jetpack, leaving the hunter fighting the beast as he escapes. Jango guns the beast down and continues the chase through the space station. He comes upon a Gran adviser of Meeko's, who he "recruits" into leading him to his prey. The two head into Merchant Row, a bazaar of shops and alleys. From there, they find Meeko in his hideout as he examines the purity of the death sticks he and his henchmen are dealing. Meeko again flees and puts his men between him and Fett. Another chase through the streets, but Meeko steals a speeder and zooms off.

Jango buys a jetpack from the speeder vendor and takes off after the stolen speeder. The speeder crashes into a door into the docking bays, and Meeko limps into the bays with Jango still hot on his trail. After several close calls with conveyor belts and sharp drops, Fett catches up to Meeko just as he reaches his ship (the Longshot). Jango shoots out the vessel's weapon turrets, sending it back to the ground.

Jango hauls the injured-but-still-alive Meeko to his employer, a female Toydarian named Rozatta (owner of Outland Station). Rozatta then gives him a

message from a guy named 'Tyranus,' who offers a jaw-dropping five million credits for the killing of Komari Vosa and the destruction of the Bando Gora. Roz warns Fett against it – no bounty hunter has survived an attempt on that group. Fett takes it anyway and heads off to Coruscant on Roz's advice; a small-time death stick dealer named Jervis Gloom may lead Fett to the cult. But he's not the only one Dooku contacts – he also calls upon Montross, a former member of Jango's True Mandalorian squad...

Jango's rickety old ship, Jaster's Legacy, limps towards the entertainment district of Coruscant. Speaking to Jango in his cockpit over holo, Roz scoffs at him keeping such an old relic for a vessel. She says he's so obsessed with the man who took him under his wing – why don't he find someone to take under his wing? Jango laughs at the thought and lands near Jervis's reported location.

Jango quickly snares three of Jervis's men and finds his factory. After turning Gloom in to the police, Jango takes the dealer's craft and flies it into the industrial district and a death stick factory Gloom pointed out to him, owned by one Groff Haugg. On a hunch, Jango has some of the death sticks stored there analyzed and learns they contain a powerful, mind-altering drug not found in the usual death sticks. He tears through the factory, tagging and bagging several henchmen in search of Haugg. He eventually finds him... frozen to death in a carbon freezer by Montross!

Jango battles his former lieutenant, but the traitor jeers him and escapes. Jango, undeterred, checks the factory's computer. He notes that a senator must be involved to keep the operation so quiet, and he finds a holo of that terrified Senator wanting to know if the "bounty hunters" are coming after him. Roz recognizes the green Twi'lek as one Senator Trill, and gives Jango his penthouse address.

He finds the building is crawling with Coruscant security, and he faces a dangerous shoot-and-climb ahead. But he is the best, and makes his way into the Senator's penthouse where he demands the location of Vosa from the terrified Senator. He gasps out that a Dug kingpin named Sebolto is manufacturing a new kind of death stick on Malastare with the Bando Gora's help.

A police assault ship appears in the skies over the skyscraper and loudly demands Jango release the Senator. In response, Jango flings Trell off the

balcony. He then blows up the police ship for good measure and flies off Coruscant.

Up in orbit, Roz (on holo) notes that Fett can't just walk into Sebolto's realm. But she does have an "invitation" – Bendix Fust, an inmate in the Republic's Oovo IV maximum-security prison, has a 50,000 living bounty on him posted by Sebolto. Montross is now said to be in the Gazzari system (Groff was evidently more afraid of the Bando Gora than him), so he won't have to worry about him this time. Roz urges him to consider retiring, settling down, maybe have a kid. "Not in this life, Roz."

Meanwhile, on another planet, a fearsome horned alien warns his female leader that their Coruscant contacts are dead. The woman tells him that the contacts are replaceable – but the bounty hunters, if they surface again, are to be dealt with...

Following a cargo vessel in through the planetary asteroid belt, Jango lands the Legacy under the planetary shield. Breaking into the prison proves surprisingly easy, but getting Fust is not – just as Jango reaches a vent to Fust's cell, a woman in purple spandex and a veiled hat busts him out herself and starts a riot! A furious Jango fights his way through an alarmed army of prison guards and escaped cons alike and escapes the prison. He spots the newly-incarcerated Meeko along the way and fries him. When he reaches his ship, he sees the woman and Fust trying to break into it.

As he starts to berate the woman for wrecking his plan, a blue-and-gray vessel shoots down out of the sky – and blows the Legacy to atoms!! "That ship's mine," Jango snarls as it flies away. Forced to join forces, the three sabotage the reactors powering the planetary shield.

Jango then sneaks into a hangar adjoining the reactors and steals the vessel (a prototype Firespray-class police vessel) and vaporizes the other five prototypes. He deactivates the Firespray's transponder to trick the officials into thinking that ship destroyed too. He takes the woman and Fust with him to Malastare. The woman introduces herself as Zam Wesell, and notes she already knows who Fett is. He doesn't know her, though, and calls her a reckless amateur.

Elsewhere, Montross figures out he was tricked and learns about the prison break. He heads for Malastare himself. When the Firespray reaches Malastare, Jango is dropped off in the jungle while Zam (on Fett's orders – he threatens to

kill her if she refuses) presents Fust and acts “charming” for Sebolto. Meanwhile, Fett treks through the jungle towards the Dug crimelord’s lair. Gran, Dugs and Nexus block his way. He fights his way to the base, but finds Sebolto has retreated to a fortress nearby. With Zam covering him with his sniper rifle, Fett accesses a secret passage to the palace and confronts the Dug kingpin.

Sebolto panics and jumps down an underground pipe into a death stick factory. He knocks himself cold on the wall just under his escape route, however, and falls into a molten chemical vat. “That’ll be a sour batch,” Jango mutters. But he explores the death stick factory anyway and meets the spooky Bando Gora for the first time. He also finds Montross’ ship, and again battles the traitor. This time Montross is on a skiff, and again he escapes as Zam rejoins Jango.

The woman demands to know what’s going on, and Jango finally tells her about the Bando Gora. He notes that a freighter in Sebolto’s hangar had Huttese markings on it, so the Hutts are involved in the Gora’s “instant brainwashing/ recruiting” scheme.

As the Firespray flies to Tatooine, Montross monitors them via a listening device planted on the ship and heads there as well. Once in Tatooine orbit, Jango calls Roz for info. She tells him that an old friend of hers, Watto, told her that Gardulla and Jabba are in a heated feud for control of Tatooine. Since a gift is required to meet with a Hutt, she tells him that Watto placed a bounty on Jabba’s behalf (in return for a finder’s fee) on one Longo Two-Guns and his band of bandits.

Jango decides to meet with Jabba while Zam meets with Gardulla. Roz also asks if he’s come up with a new name for the Firespray. He has. “Slave I.” A short time later, Jango presents Jabba the Hutt with the capture of Two-Guns and his gang. Jabba approves, and tells him that Gardulla is the Bando Gora supplier. He’d appreciate it if Jango were to terminate her. Jango agrees.

He flies the Slave I into a Tusken canyon near her palace, as he overhears on his helmet headset Zam being captured by the Hutt’s henchmen. He successfully breaks into the palace and finds Zam in a cell. When he refuses to let her out until after Gardulla’s been dealt with, she screams for the guards. Brought before Gardulla, Jango learns that Zam is a shapeshifter – talk about two-faced! Jango is stripped of his weaponry and thrown into a pit to be eaten by Gardulla’s pet krayt dragon. But they forgot his mini-torch, which he uses to cut his way through a grate at the pit’s side. After retaking his weapons and fighting through



the palace, he feeds Gardulla (after she refuses to tell him where Vosa is) to her own dragon with the words “Jabba sends his regards.” (The krayt doesn’t actually eat her, though. It just keeps her busy, and she eventually does escape.)

He then leaves Zam in the cell of the now-empty palace. He calls up Roz again...and this time, it’s Montross on the other end. He’s tortured Vosa’s location out of Roz! Jango snarls that Montross has just signed his own death warrant and high-tails it to Outland Station.

He finds it rigged to blow, with a dying Roz lying on the floor of her office. She just barely has enough life left to slip a holodisc into Jango’s hand before expiring. Jango flees the exploding station and follows the coordinates Roz gave him – coordinates that led to the fog-enshrouded moon of Kohlma, in the Bogden system.

The moon is a nightmare of gothic churches, cathedrals, catacombs, and graveyards flooded with acid. The horrible spirits of the Bando Gora are here in force, and Jango makes good use of his flame-thrower to dispatch the demon creatures. And soon, he again encounters Montross.

This time it’s to the death, and Montross dons his own Mandalorian helmet to wage the battle. After a hard-fought contest, Jango leaves the wounded Montross to face the Gora’s wrath. Jango then heads into the massive castle of Komari Vosa, but is overwhelmed by dozens of Bando Gora who present him to Vosa. She tortures him, vowing to make him her slave. Zam Wesell suddenly appears, her blaster aimed at Jango and Vosa both. Vosa ignites two lightsabers and easily blocks Zam’s shots, sending one back into her. Dazed, Zam shoots Jango’s shackles off. “We’re even now.”

Jango reclaims his gear and confronts Vosa in her throne room. Vosa is extremely quick and nimble, but Jango is barely able to wrap his metal cable around her and gun her down.

“Which will it be, bounty hunter,” she gasps. “Dead or alive?”

Before he can decide, her neck suddenly snap...and Count Dooku enters the room and congratulates Jango. He has a new offer for the bounty hunter: To come to the planet Kamino and donate his DNA and his expertise to creating and training the perfect army – exact clones of Jango himself, grown at twice the normal rate and programmed for absolute loyalty and obedience.

Jango considers this, and agrees on one condition – that he take the first clone, unaltered, for himself. The deal is struck, and Jango flies the wounded Zam off the moon of Bogden in the Slave I...

### Recorded 32 B.B.Y.

Author: Jedi Master Ki-Adi-Mundi

*Meditation is difficult.*

*Several months ago, I pursued the criminal Ephant Mon to Tatooine. At the time, I did not know of Anakin Skywalker's existence, let alone that Tatooine was his homeworld. The galaxy seemed less complicated then, when I believed the Sith were extinct. But upon meeting Skywalker, who is absolutely teeming with midi-chlorians and may very well be the Chosen One, I could not help questioning my own perceptive abilities.*

*Time and again, the Force has guided my heart and my weapon. I trust my most powerful ally, but cannot dismiss a sense of personal failure. I was on Tatooine before Qui-Gon Jinn discovered the boy. Although I sensed a disturbance in the Force there, how could I have not sensed the presence of one so strong with the Force? It is not that my own powers are more considerable than Qui-Gon's were, but that Skywalker is a beacon of power.*

*It is little consolation that every member of the Jedi Council was surprised by recent events: the discovery of Skywalker, the death of Qui-Gon Jinn, and the return of the Sith. Despite our initial refusal to allow Skywalker to be trained to become a Jedi, none of us anticipated the circumstances that would prompt us to revise our decision. This troubles us all.*

*Now evidence has surfaced that Sharad Hett may be alive, and once again I am traveling to that haven of mirages and lies called Tatooine. Before I left Coruscant, the Dark Woman herself told me she has had dreams of great dangers that await me at my destination. She has never given me any reason to dismiss the value of her dreams.*

*Tatooine cannot be a coincidence. I do not believe in coincidences.*



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Tatooine cannot be a coincidence. I do not believe in coincidences.

"Events are moving too fast." Those were my own words, addressed to Qui-Gon on the occasion of the Council's decision to reject his request to train young Skywalker. So much has happened since then. I find it troubling that I am unable—even during meditation—to entirely suspend those words from my mind.

What disturbs me most of all is Anakin Skywalker himself. It is not in my nature to make assumptions about anyone based on appearance, and yet I find it almost alarming that the boy looks so entirely unremarkable. If I didn't know better, I would have dismissed him as a harmless ragamuffin. His responses to our tests showed he was incredibly adept at using the Force to anticipate the immediate future, but could he really have been conceived by the midi-chlorians, as Qui-Gon suggested? And if he is the Chosen One, destined to bring balance to the Force, why do I sense some danger about this boy, as if he is a threat? I wish I knew.

Like Anakin, I was well past infancy when I began my training at the Jedi Temple. There was much concern about whether I was too old to learn the ways of the Force, that my Cerean childhood might cloud my judgments, but... I am not certain of how to express myself. My mind tells me I should feel empathy for Anakin, but my instinct tells me something else. Jedi are trained not to feel fear, but I believe that this may be the discomfort I sense from Anakin. No, I'm not afraid of him. He is, after all, merely a boy. But as a father myself, I can positively attest that children can grow in unexpected ways, and this may be what I fear: not who Anakin Skywalker is, but what he might become.

With respect to Qui-Gon's memory, I will make every effort to treat Anakin as I would any Padawan, but I intend to be much more mindful of him than others. And given that the Sith have resumed their dark enterprise, I shall take some consolation in the knowledge that Anakin was not discovered by them instead.

*I regret to announce that Sharad Hett is dead. Even though I witnessed his passing, I admit it is hard for me to believe he is gone. Every living Jedi knows his name, and any Jedi born within the last thirty years would recognize his weapon. I have presented my full report of his activities on Tatooine to the Jedi Council, but feel compelled to notify every Jedi that Sharad Hett lived and died a Jedi.*

*I also declare my decision to take Sharad Hett's son, A'Sharad Hett, as my Padawan. Since birth, A'Sharad was raised by his father as a Jedi, and the Force is strong in him. He built his own lightsaber, and has inherited his father's weapon. Although I know not whether A'Sharad will choose one weapon over the other, I am certain that he will honor his father and the Jedi Order.*

### **The Life Of Longo Two-Guns**

The life of Longo Two-Guns became a dizzying whirl as his body tumbled down the shaft under the trap door which had opened beneath his feet. At the bottom, sand forced its way into his eyes, his ears, and his nostrils as his face broke the fall.

Hoots and laughter from the orifices of a dozen different beings fell upon him from somewhere above. A Gamorrean grunted his amusement. A chattering Jawa spouted something incomprehensible. Loudest of all, though, was the deep, guttural rumbling of a gloating Hutt.

Longo spat out a mixture of blood and grit and curses as he struggled to his hands and knees. One of those curses took the name of the creature who'd put him here.

"Jabba!" he coughed, then spat again. "Jabba, what ... ?"

As he raised his head, Longo saw the massive bulk of Jabba the Hutt high above him, flanked by his major domo and the bounty hunter, Jango Fett. Various appendages belonging to members of Jabba's ecstatic entourage waved triumphantly and mockingly in the air above him. Several of the creatures had begun a sort of chant.

"This is it?" Longo shouted. "You're going to keep me in a hole? Me? How long do you think this will hold me, Jabba? How long? When I get out of here, I'm going to ..."

His bravado was interrupted by a heavy thud from behind. Whirling, Longo caught a glimpse of a green, fleshy mass mere inches from his face before a massive arm knocked him flying across the sandy floor of the pit. Longo came to rest on his back, then sat up.

Resting his hands on the butt of a giant battle axe, the largest Gamorrean he had ever seen glared at Longo with eyes of green fire. The giant stood a full two heads taller than his porcine brethren. Layers of fat rippled over a mass of muscle beneath his dark green skin. There was intelligence in those eyes – a cruel intellect previously unseen in the species.

Jabba's booming chuckle echoed down upon Longo. "Perhaps you are familiar with my executioner, Lomrokk." The Hutt's arm quivered as he gestured at the massive Gamorrean. "Renowned for his killing prowess in fighting pits across the outer rim. The blade he wields has ended the life of every creature he has met in combat. With it, Lomrokk has even slain a mighty gundark.

"So tell me, bounty hunter." Jabba's eyes narrowed as he leaned toward the edge of the pit. "Unarmed and unarmored, how do you think you will fare against the likes of Lomrokk?"

Grunting, the porcine giant raised his axe high overhead and held it there. Cheers and hoots and howls echoed all around. Jabba barked a command, and his rumbling laughter fell from above as the axe began to fall.

Uselessly raising a protective arm, Longo screamed.

## **31 bby**

### **Deep Spoilers**

A Gungan danced at the starting line, frantically waving a fan of translucent opee fins. The crowd roared within the great bubble of the Otoh Gunga Garden; muting the engines of thirty-two bongo subs as they blasted out of their pens and gurgled onto the water track.

The Otoh Gunga Challenge was open to anyone with a single-engine sub that could achieve a speed of at least 100 longos, fast enough to outrun a klaa fish on its best day. Weapons were not allowed, and military subs were prohibited

unless they had been decommissioned. Beyond that, the rules were as wide open as an opee's eyes.

The contending subs had varied designs, but all were rigged for speed. Some were organically engineered monobubbles, with single hydrostatic field canopies to protect the cockpits. Others were the more prevalent tribubbles, with their port and starboard compartments sealed and flooded. This left the "blinded" sub with only the forward cockpit bubble, enabling the power unit to direct more energy to the electromotive field generators. Some cockpits carried three Gungans, but most contained a single pilot.

The bongos sped out of the launch pool and into the half-kilometer-long water-filled race tube that wrapped around lower interior of the Otoh Gunga Garden. The race tube led to a portal that emptied into Lake Paonga, where the race would continue. Commanding the early lead was the Opee Fleer, a decommissioned military sub with a crew of three. Compared to the sleeker designs, it was a cumbersome vessel that needed to slow down to make the sharper turns, but its breadth made it difficult for other subs to pass it in the narrow race tube. Pursuing the Opee Fleer were three blinded monobubbles piloted by Tup Tup Grizbain, Friggy Squig, and Zak "Squidfella" Quiglee. After them came the purple custom-grown monobubble bongo helmed by Brooboo Seep, the oldest pilot in the race and favored by many on the Rep Council.

The first five subs tore through the portal and into the dark waters of Lake Paonga. Spectators in Otoh Gunga Garden quickly redirected their eyes to the large orb-shaped monitors suspended from the arena bubble's ceiling, but others kept their gaze on two subs that were still heading for the portal, operated by Spleed Nukkels and Neb Neb Goodrow.

Humming to herself as she weaved past a broad-bellied bongo, Spleed Nukkels felt downright cozy in her blue blinded monobubble, with its distinctive elongated forward diving plane. Her wake flipped the broad-bellied bongo into a roll, spinning it toward the green, custom monobubble bongo hounding her tail. In the green bongo, Neb Neb Goodrow was chewing on a stick of gimer bark. Neb Neb's bongo had a bulked-up engine with rotating, clipped electromotive fins that allowed for tight turns. Certainly it was not the design of these two

bongos that captivated spectators; rather, it was the reckless manner in which the two Gungans steered them.

As Spleed and Neb Neb accelerated through the race tube, other bongos got out of their way. By the time they reached the portal for Lake Paonga, they were traveling side by side and had left a dangerously churning wake behind them. While the trailing bongos slowed to navigate through the swirling bubble trail, Spleed and Neb Neb bolted after the leading subs.

Early in their racing careers, Spleed and Neb Neb had been accused of collusion by their competitors. Working together to ram or drive other bongos off course was not allowed in any official competition. These accusations ended after race officials reviewed recordings of the two in action, and determined that Spleed and Neb Neb were indeed competing against each another. The problem was that they weren't competing with anyone else. As Spleed had been widely quoted, "Mesa racen Neb Neb Goodrow. Everybody else just inda way."

Not surprisingly, several bongo racers had submitted requests to have Neb Neb and Spleed banned from the sport. The common gripe was that they were too reckless, that they had given the sport a bad name. Squidfella Quiglee stressed that unless officials revised the rules of the game, it was only a matter of time before Neb Neb and Spleed's breakneck antics got somebody pasted.

Responding to Squidfella's accusations, Spleed commented that any racer who worried about getting pasted should stay at home. Neb Neb laughed, adding, "Squidfella's got mesa un Spleed all wrongo. Mabee wesa lookee reckless, boot it taken a lotta skill to blast past da otter racers un let dem live."

Squidfella Quiglee had gone so far as to file official charges, cosigned by his fellow whiners, Tup Tup Grizbain and Friggy Squig. Unfortunately for the disgruntled trio, the charges were tossed out by the Gungan race commissioner and never reached the Rep Council.

The Opee Fleeer maintained its lead and was the first bongo to reach the buoy making a confident, wide turn before heading for the next transport tube, a floating construct tethered to the lake floor. The tube had a larger diameter than the one in Otoh Gunga Garden, and its five-kilometer length spiraled downward along the continental slope to the water-filled underwaterways below Lake Paonga. Dozens of orb-shaped remote-seein devices floated beside

the transparent tube, ready to broadcast images of the race to the spectators in Otoh Gunga Garden.

With a great burst of speed, the Opee Fleer shot into the transparent tube, followed by Squidfella, Tup Tup, and Friggy. Seconds later, Brooboo Seep's bongo entered the tube. Brooboo had his eyestalks trained on the tail of Friggy's craft when Neb Neb's green bongo shot underneath him, its wake propelling Brooboo toward the tube's ceiling. Brooboo pushed down hard on his controls, sending his craft into an angled dive. Spleed's blinded monobubble soared over his canopy and forced him to execute a tight roll to avoid collision. As Brooboo straightened out and watched Spleed's blue bongo zoom ahead of him, he realized he was holding his breath. He sucked in some air, briefly wondered whether he should retire from bongo racing, then stomped on the accelerator. Spleed shot past Neb Neb and came up fast behind Friggy. She did not have to look at her navigation sensor field indicator to know that Neb Neb was right behind her and would try to overtake her before reaching the end of the tube. Even if she had looked at her sensor, it would have been of little use, since it was still broken from the last race. In front of Spleed, Friggy was maintaining a long twisty, steering his sub through a controlled roll in an effort to prevent Spleed from passing him.

"Tube hog," Spleed muttered, then sped forward, aiming for Friggy's fins.

Seated in his spectator box in the Otoh Gunga Garden bubble, Boss Nass grinned as the bongos -- visible on the Garden's large monitors -- careened through the race tube in Lake Paonga. However, the ruler of Otoh Gunga was not looking at the monitors but at the gathered crowd. Naturally, many of them were, like himself, Gungan bongo racing fans, but there was also a new element to the audience.

Tourists.

And not just the human population of Naboo, although they were well represented in Otoh Gunga Garden that night. Boss Nass had to admit that he would have had difficulty distinguishing one humanoid species from the next were it not for their clothes. In his eyes, the Naboo dressed better.

Since the Battle of Naboo, word had spread of the courageous and resourceful people that had crushed the Neimoidian Trade Federation. Although Boss Nass was immensely pleased and proud of his alliance with the humans of Naboo, he was even more delighted by the countless representatives of Republic planets who had contacted him personally, requesting visits to Otoh Gunga and audience with the Boss who commanded the Grand Gungan Army. With great discretion, Boss Nass had asked around about whether Theed had received as many requests from outlanders. If the information he had gained were true, Otoh Gunga was definitely the more popular destination.

As it showdabe, he thought -- and without any malice whatsoever to the brave citizens of Theed. Theed was a city rooted in soil and exposed to sky, like so many other cities on Republic worlds. Otoh Gunga, on the other hand, was mysterious. Far below the surface of Lake Paonga, Otoh Gunga was unaffected by clouds or starlight, representing the most advanced underwater civilization in the known galaxy.

Boss Nass narrowed his eyes and surveyed the crowd. He recognized some of the more distinctive alien species, including contingents from Duros and Moonus Mandel, who waved penants that displayed the names of their favorite racers. It seemed that everyone had been caught up by Bongomania.

Boss Nass noticed one of his advisors, Rep Teers, hopping up to his box. Rep Teers leaned close to Boss Nass and said, "Da Ithorian ambassador sayen dat da Otoh Gunga Challenge is mure exciten dan da Podracen on Malastare!"

Boss Nass grinned. He did not know anything about Podracing, but if the Ithorian ambassador thought it was inferior to bongo racing, that was good enough for the Boss.

Suddenly the crowd gasped, and Boss Nass followed their collective gaze to the monitors. "What gooie-on?!" Boss Nass demanded. "Where da replay?"

Boss Nass had missed a crash in the race tube.

\* \* \*

"Ouches," Neb Neb Goodrow commented as he steered deftly past the wreckage of Friggy Squig's bongo, just before the organic race tube --

engineered to eject slow-moving objects --opened at the side and spat the demolished sub and its seething pilot into Lake Paonga.

Neb Neb wondered, What was dot lame-noggin tinken?! Anyone who perpetrated a twisty in front of Spleed Nukkels was about as stupid as... well, Neb Neb was at a loss for an appropriate metaphor. Sometimes, Neb Neb suspected that Spleed lived to teach painful lessons to show-offs like Friggy. The instant Spleed's extended diving plane had tapped Friggy's fins, she threw her sub forward and pulled up sharply, forcing his fins back against the underside of her bongo. Friggy might as well have steered into the side of the tube on purpose.

Distracted by Friggy's lack of brains, Neb Neb almost did not see Brooboo Seep creeping up along his starboard side. Neb Neb wagged his side stabilizers, which alarmed Brooboo and made him slow down, then sped after Spleed's bongo.

Spleed was right behind Squidfella Quiglee and Tup Tup Grizbain, who were swerving along the interior of the tube, apparently working together to prevent Spleed from slipping past. Neb Neb dropped below Spleed and maneuvered into a narrow opening between Squidfella and Tup Tup's bongos. Neb Neb heard his engines whine as he swooshed between his rivals and was swept up in the wake of the Opee Fleeer, which was nearing the race tube's exit. As the Opee Fleeer approached the mouth of the tube, Neb Neb deftly hurtled past the larger sub and maneuvered in front of it, then swerved out of the tube and into Lake Paonga.

The Opee Fleeer hit Neb Neb's hard wake, shuddered, and slowed. The over-eager Tup Tup slammed into the larger sub's stern, nearly pulverizing both bongos. Squidfella frantically steered his bongo past the disabled vessels and miraculously exited the tube without damage.

Spleed shot from the tube after Squidfella and Neb Neb, stealing a glance to check on the other racers. She spotted Tup Tup, who had abandoned his damaged bongo and was rising up to the surface in his escape bubble. Then she locked eyes on the cockpit of the Opee Fleeer, in which three irate Gungans seemed on the verge of strangling one another.



Spleed steered through an open crevice and plunged into the dark depths. She caught sight of Squidfella's navigational lights and chased his bongo, gliding past a school of luminescent fish. Spleed couldn't spot any remote-seein devices in the crevice, but a moment later she saw why: An electric kreetch eel was chomping on the last one -- quite a disappointment to the eager spectators back at Otoh Gunga Garden.

The eel ignored her, so Spleed accelerated and came up alongside Squidfella's bongo. Perhaps Squidfella had noticed that the remote-seein' devices had been eaten, or maybe he was frustrated with Spleed's tenacity. In any event, without any-spectators watching over him, he smiled at Spleed, swung his bongo to the side, and rammed her hard.

Spleed gritted her teeth but kept her composure, swerving in front of Squidfella. Up ahead, she saw Neb Neb's bongo angling through the cavern. Squidfella rammed her again. This time Spleed slowed down, figuring that she would let the goon pass her, but then felt Squidfella's bongo slam her a third time.

He wasn't passing.

Spleed flashed her navigational lights three times at Neb Neb, signalling him that she was in trouble. Traditionally, racers used the signal to warn others of dangerous beasts, but under the circumstances, the signal seemed in order. Squidfella slammed her bongo again, shorting her lights. Spleed didn't want to be anywhere near him, but she didn't much like the idea of flitting about in the cavern without lights.

Fortunately, she still had engine power. She tightened her grip on the controls and sped after Neb Neb's sub, with Squidfella chomping at her fins.

She lost sight of Neb Neb's sub, the only light source coming from Squidfella's bongo behind her. She threw her sub into reverse and bounced off Squidfella's hull.

Bright lights appeared from behind a jagged outcropping of volcanic rock up ahead. Spleed could see Neb Neb's bongo. He had seen her signal after all and turned about. Neb Neb sized up the situation in an instant and headed for Squidfella, aiming his forward diving plane at Squidfella's cockpit canopy. Squidfella's eyes went wide as his rival's diving plane pierced one of the canopy

braces. Spleed spun around in time to see the momentary collision, a flash of light, and the look of horror on Squidfella's face as water sprayed him through cracks in his canopy.

While Squidfella tried to secure the canopy and halt the leak, Neb Neb and Spleed gazed out through their own hydrostatic canopies to see Brooboo Seep tooling through the open water in their direction.

Spleed's navigational lights came on, as if on cue. She smiled and stuck her tongue out at Neb Neb, and then both took off, leaving Squidfella with his sinking sub.

Brooboo Seep's purple bongo was now in the lead, followed by Neb Neb and Spleed. Brooboo emerged from the crevice, returning to Lake Paonga, then skirted around a marker buoy and headed for an underwater mountain. The racers veered toward a narrow, rock-walled tunnel cut through the base of the mountain that would take them back to Otoh Gunga Garden and the finish line.

Neb Neb and Spleed cleared the crevice and chased after Brooboo. The three submersibles knifed through the deep water, racing over the mountain's foothills and toward the passage. Several remote-seein' devices bobbed around the tunnel's entrance. Neb Neb's sub lifted and rolled. The daring Gungan felt his long earlobes flop against the ceiling of his upside-down bongo's canopy, and he stomped on the accelerator. The roll was a deliberate, perhaps even clever attempt to make an inverted pass over the Brooboo's bongo and gain the lead. There was only one problem with Neb Neb's tactic: Spleed was attempting the exact same maneuver.

The collision was spectacular. There was a loud whummf as a bright spark flared between Neb Neb and Spleed's bongos, which had swung directly over Brooboo Seep's sub, and an explosion of bubbles spilled outward in all directions. The blast pushed down on Brooboo's bongo, tearing at his sub's rotating fins and causing him to swerve, but Brooboo held his course.

Neb Neb and Spleed were less fortunate. Spleed's forward diving plane had been sheared off; Neb Neb's starboard buoyancy tank had ruptured, and both subs were spinning toward the jagged cliffs of the underwater mountain. As Brooboo vanished into the tunnel's dark orifice, Neb Neb and Spleed punched

their respective ejectors, and both pilots -- still contained within their hydrostatic cockpit bubbles -- were catapulted, seats and all, away from their subs. A split second later, their bongos crashed into the mountain, spraying debris across the lake floor.

The two ejected bubbles carried their occupants up from the depths, rising with a current that flowed past the side of the mountain. The bubbles were close enough that Neb Neb and Spleed could see each other, and they exchanged knowing glances. Having crashed in previous competitions, they could easily anticipate what would happen next. They would have to face their sponsors, who would no doubt be angered at the loss of the expensive bongos. Then there would be the outcries from the sport's critics. Dubbed by bongo racers as "fun-boggers," these were the clean-up squads and safety consultants, conservation groups and concerned parents, all of whom would be relieved and delighted were bongo racing abolished.

Despite these concerns, both Neb Neb and Spleed took certain comfort in one additional bit of knowledge: They were famous. By the next Otoh Gunga Challenge, some race enthusiasts would have to consult a datapad to recall that Brooboo Seep had claimed the last trophy, but nobody would forget the incredible crash and the two Gungans who had survived it.

Neb Neb and Spleed's hydrostatic spheres broke the water's surface, and the Gungans squinted at the brightness of the daylit sky. They deactivated the upper half of their spheres, leaving each of them sitting in a transparent saucer. Although neither had won the race, both had survived, which was reason enough to perform their post-race ritual. As they were rocking with the waves in their floating hemispheres, the ritual's degree of difficulty was increased greatly, but both believed that to forego the ritual would almost certainly bring bad luck.

Neb Neb and Spleed faced each other, nodded once, then spoke simultaneously: "Mayda bubbles always bees behind yous." Then they cocked back their necks, hawked, and spat high into the air. With some satisfaction, they watched the twin gobs of saliva arc over the water and collide with a stomach-churning splat. Their aim was true and their good luck was intact.

Or so they thought.

\* \* \*

"Yousa revoked uss-ens bongo licenses?!" exclaimed Spleed, who stood beside Neb Neb in the Otoh Gunga office of the bongo race commissioner, Cova Burmooze. Hearing the words "revoked" and "licenses" in the same sentence, Neb Neb looked like he was about to fall ill. It was bad enough that Cova didn't believe a word they'd said about Squidfella Quiglee. It was even worse that Squidfella's bongo had been found empty in the crevice, and that no one had seen him since the race. Even worse was the fact that Neb Neb and Spleed were widely suspected of having killed Squidfella in the crevice. But now, having their licenses revoked ... well, that was the very worst indeed.

"Da Rep Council," Cova informed the devastated pair, "also suggest-ed yousa showdabe thrown inda lock-up place until wesa know Squidfella Quiglee isa live, boot Boss Nass say dare gotta be mure evidence. Still, a lotta Gungans isa callen youse deep spoilers, un a lotta elders isa pitty irate wit yousa for boomin yousa bongos into da mountain."

"Dey wowdabe mure heppy if wesa got pasted?" Neb Neb asked with genuine concern, unphased by Cova's remark about "deep spoilers." Neb Neb and Spleed had heard that one before.

Cova shrugged. "Da elders say da moutain is sacred."

"Sacred?!" Spleed sputtered. "Wesa broken no rules! Wesa no da ones dat putta tunnel through dat mountain! Since when is dare no crashen law in an official bongo race?"

Cova ignored Neb Neb's remarks. "Yousa duey crash-ed at da wrongo time. Da Rep Council gotta complaints about bongo racen. Some sayen too noisy, some sayen too messy, some sayen possible maxibad gamblin and corruption--"

"Gamblin and corruption?!" echoed the racers.

"Dat's right," Cova said, and his fixed gaze carried a hint of casual suspicion.

"Dare's some sayen dat you duey throwen da races un crashen ... on purpose."

The accusation hit Spleed and Neb Neb like a blast of hot air. Eyes wide and earlobes tensed, Spleed protested, "Yousa tink sumbotty payen uss-ens to

crash? Den yousa tell me whosa dat sumbotty is, causen mesa wanten to see dem clams!"

Before the race commissioner could respond, Neb Neb held out his hands, palms exposed. "Lookee, Cova," he said.

"Wesa got nutten to hide. Yousa wanna investigate uss-ens? Do it!"

Cova drummed his thick fingers on the top of his desk. "Yousa tellen mesa dat yousa always rilly racen to win?"

"Absolootly!" Neb Neb answered without hesitation. "Wesa nebber competen to lose!"

"So all-n yous crashes ... ?"

"Axadentes happen," said Spleed.

Apparently skeptical, Cova said, "Axadentes, huh? What if some say both-n yous no lucky un clumsy?"

"Haw!" Neb Neb laughed. "Wesa da luckiest un da moto skilled too! If wesa no lucky un clumsy, how comen wesa still breathin, standen hair in yous office, instedda maken liken fish food?"

Cova clapped his hands together and smiled. "Yousa lucky, all right. Boss Nass liken bongo racen, un tinks yous duey is good sports. Dat's why he talkie tooda Council, un tell dem dat youse only ganna get a short suspension."

"How longo is a short suspension?" asked Neb Neb.

Cova grinned. "Mesa tinks youse be back in da races just as soonest yousa do Boss Nass a favor."

Spleed gulped. "A favor? For da Boss?"

"Dat's right," said Cova. "It involves hisen old heyblibber."

\* \* \*

Major Fassa met Captain Tarpals in front of a crowded restaurant bubble that adjoined the City Bigspace. Fassa wore a civilian outfit and could not help but

frown when she saw that the kaadu patrol chief was still in uniform. "Yousa worken overtime," she said.

Tarpals nodded. "Sumptin come up."

"Seems liken sumptin always comen up. Any word about Squidfella Quiglee?"

"Noyet," Tarpals replied. "Patrols still lookee for him."

Fassa noticed that Tarpals was carrying a small rolled scroll, and asked, "What's dat."

"A message from Boss Nass. My have to take it to Lob Dizz."

"My take da message to Dizz for yousa," Fassa offered.

"Tanks," Tarpals said as he handed the scroll to Fassa. "Boot firstest, let's take-a walk."

Leaving the restaurant bubble, they entered the City Bigspace and stepped onto the Grand Walkway. In every direction wandered hundreds of tourists. Many of them were first-time visitors to Otoh Gunga, and several were clearly neither Gungans nor Naboo. In the aftermath of the Battle of Naboo, the ambassadors of other Republic planets had taken a keen interest in Naboo culture, Otoh Gunga in particular. At the sight of two humanoids exchanging a long kiss before a Gungan ceremonial fountain, Tarpals winced.

"Da tings some people do in public," Tarpals commented.

"My tinks daza honeymoonen," said Fassa.

"Honeymoonen?" said Tarpals. "What's dat?"

"Mesa nut surr," Fassa said, "boot mesa hear talken. Word is dat outlaunders tink dat Otoh Gunga is `good place for honeymoonen."

Tarpals stole a quick glance back at the kissing couple, who remained locked in a tight embrace. "My wonder if dat meanen honeymoonen is no good in otter places. Mabee some places it even illegal."

Fassa stopped walking and said, "What gooie-on,Tarpals. Yousa tryen to tell mesa sumptin?"

Tarpals gazed into Fassa's eyes, then looked away. "Tings is changen too fast in dis city," he said at last. "At firstest, mesa tinken dat some change is good. Bein friends wit da Naboo seemed liken good ting, un still seems liken a good ting. Boot all dese otter beings ... Fassa, daza drivin mesa nutsen."

"What?" Fassa said, surprised by Tarpals' admission.

"Moto of dem is okeyday," Tarpals continued. "Boot some ... dey bringen dair own food un talkie-ways. Dey traden garments wit uss-ens, boot dair garments isa no good for wearin underwater. Dey comen hair to get a looker round, boot dey no learn da local laws or customs. Dey walk where dey no supposed to walk, un mesa tinks dat some of dem been swipen locap plants." Tarpals shook his head.

"In otter words," Fassa interjected, "Yousa confound-ed becausen some outlaunders got no respect for uss-ens culture?"

Tarpals nodded. Fassa beamed. "Den yousa no avoiden mesa becausen mesa uncle is Boss Nass?"

"What?" Tarpals gasped, lifting the lids of his eyestalks. "Doan be ridiculous. Mesa beyond all dat." Then Tarpals looked past Fassa's shoulder and said "Uh-oh."

"What yet?"

"Duty callen," Tarpals snarled as he moved away from Fassa. "Dat honeymoonen couple just climb-ed into da ceremonial fountain."

Fassa watched Tarpals walk toward the soaking couple, then looked down at the rolled scroll in her hand. Deciding that she didn't want to wait around for Tarpals, she turned to exit the City Bigspace and headed for Lob Dizz's laboratory bubble.

Lob Dizz was one of the most respected engineers in Otoh Gunga, especially for her expertise with bongo propulsion systems. She was passionate about her work, and most of her assignments were official jobs for the Otoh Gunga Transit Authority or Grand Gungan Army. Her current project was more personal in nature; Boss Nass had asked her to see whether she could do something with

the engine to his old heyblibber, the luxury sub that had been totaled by Jar Jar Binks.

Specifically, Boss Nass wanted the heyblibber's engine restored and installed into a tribubble racing bongo. He also had some specific ideas about the bongo's design, insisting on the input of a pair of racers. Lob Dizz had agreed, but when she had learned that the two racers were Spleed Nukkels and Neb Neb Goodrow, she immediately wondered whether Boss Nass were trying to punish her.

Lob Dizz heard rumors that Spleed and Neb Neb might know something about the disappearance of Squidfella Quiglee, but she didn't believe them. In all fairness, she liked Spleed and Neb Neb. She had dealt with them in the past and had employed them as test pilots, but that was before their recent string of crashes. Although Spleed and Neb Neb had never damaged any of Lob Dizz's prototypes, their reputation as crash survivors did not inspire much confidence.

As the engineer watched Spleed and Neb Neb at work in the sub pen that neighbored her laboratory, she figured that Boss Nass might not be trying to punish her after all. Perhaps the Boss intended to use the pair's cleverness and teamwork in more productive ways. The two racers had thrown themselves into their assignment with great enthusiasm and had offered several good ideas for increasing speed and navigational control. The main problem was working with the heyblibber engine itself, as the power unit had been originally engineered for a sub that had been quite a bit larger and longer than a typical bongo. Instead of being frustrated by the challenge, Spleed and Neb Nebb were thrilled by it.

"Pliz hand mesa dat flik-tweezer, Spleed," Neb Neb said from his station atop of the bongo, just behind the cockpit, where he was trying to tighten a brace on the sub's main hydrostatic field generator. The new bongo was floating in the sub pen's central work-pool, and Spleed stood in the water at the bongo's port side. Spleed passed the tool up to Neb Neb, who commented, "Dis bongo is ganna rip da slippity come next blur-spin."

"Mure clan dat," Spleed responded as she broke off a fresh rod for the sub's port trim control oil cyclers. "After wesa snap da snout un shave da flippies, dis



swimmer's gonna do some bombad plorkscrewen dat'll leave da fun-boggers cryen dry!"

Lobb Dizz closed her eyes and shook her head, trying to purge the lingo-riddled banter from her skull. Except for the word "bongo," she couldn't fully grasp what they were talking about.

There was a heavy knock at the sub pen entrance, and Lobb Dizz turned to see a female Gungan under the arched doorway. "Major Fassa! Mesa almos no reckonize yousa outta uniform."

"Mesa on short leave," Fassa said as she stepped forward and handed the scroll to Lobb Dizz. "Dis for yousa from Boss Nass."

Lobb Dizz unrolled the scroll, read the message, and sighed. "Da Boss wanten to take hisen new bongo for a test plunge tomorrow."

Fassa looked at the bongo floating in the pool and nodded at Neb Neb and Spleed. "So, dat's mesa uncle's newest toy, huh?"

"Toy?" Spleed said. "Wit all due rispict, Major Fassa, dis no toy! Dis bongo gonna make Boss Nass da Boss Nastiest!"

"Is gonna what?" Lob Dizz said with some alarm. "Yousa tryen to maken da Boss angry?"

Neb Neb chuckled. "No worry, Dizz. Spleed no meanen da Boss gonna be angry. "'Nasti-est' meanen no sluggin un sleepen, da exspeediest un moto maxi-bombad bongo on Naboo."

Lob Dizz looked at Fassa and asked, "Yousa know what daza sayen?"

"Sorta," Fassa admitted, and her tone revealed that she did not like the sound of it. If Boss Nass wound up owning the fastest bongo on Naboo, his head would swell so much that he would require a larger crown.

A squawk sounded from Lob Dizz's communications console and a voice barked, "Lobb Dizz, yousa dare?"

"Yep, my hair," Lobb Dizz said into the comm.

"Dis Wilk Nilkers of da Cleanup Squad," the voice bellowed. "Wesa gotta 'mergency. An outlauder at da Bigspace Hotel axadently flush-ed some boiled quench weed down a wastepot, un now all da hotel's waste pipes is stuck shut."

In the sub pen, all four Gungans groaned. It was common knowledge that flushing even a small amount of boiled quench weed down a waste-pot would plug up the waste pipes for days. Not even the most simple-minded Gungan would do something so foolish.

"Lousy tourists," Lob Dizz grumbled into the comm. "My on mesa way." Lob Dizz grabbed her utility bag and headed for the doorway, then stopped, turned to Fassa, and whispered, "Pliz stay hair til mesa get back. My afraid if nobody watch dem, Neb Neb un Spleed is ganna taken da bongo out for a test run."

"Okeyday," Fassa said. She didn't have any other plans anyway. As she watched Lob Dizz leave, she caught sight of a large object gliding past the exterior of the laboratory bubble.

It was a military bongo. And Squidfella Quiglee was in the cockpit.

\* \* \*

It hadn't been easy for Squidfella Quiglee to return to Otoh Gunga and evade detection after the race. It had been even more difficult to steal a military bongo from a Gungan Grand Army sub pen and locate Neb Neb and Spleed. But Squidfella was determined, and he knew his way around pretty well. He wanted to restore a good reputation to the sport of bongo racing by making sure that Neb Neb and Spleed would never compete again.

Squidfella had faked the call from "Wilk Nilkers of da Cleanup Squad" to get Lobb Dizz out of her laboratory bubble. From the military bongo, Squidfella peered across the watery expanse that seperated him from the bubble and had seen Lobb Dizz grab her utility bag and leave. He had hoped that the other Gungan who had just arrived -- a female whom he didn't recognize -- would leave with Lobb Dizz, but when she stayed behind, all Squidfella could do was shrug. "Yousa win some..."

Squidfella fired an energy torpedo squarely at Lob Dizz's bubble. "... and yousa losen some."

\* \* \*

"Get down!" Fassa shouted as she hit the floor and rolled under a sturdy table. Spleed and Neb Neb flinched at Fassa's command and snapped their heads to look in her direction.

There was a loud explosion as the energy torpedo detonated against one of the bubble's utanode braces. The bubble's hydrostatic field flickered, and a brief, hard shower of lake water thundered down into the bubble's interior before the emergency generator kicked in and restored the field.

Soaking wet, Fassa sprang out from under the table. Neb Neb had been driven headfirst into the open cockpit of the bongo, and Spleed was cursing as she hopped out of the work-pool. Fassa looked out through the bubble's transparent walls, trying to locate the military bongo, but water was still fizzling against the re-energized hydrostatic field and she couldn't see a thing.

"What da boom-hey happened?!" Neb Neb shouted as he righted himself in the cockpit.

"Wesa under attack!" Fassa answered. "Wesa gotta get outta hair!" Eyeing Boss Nass' bongo, she asked with some urgency, "Dat ting worken or what?"

Neb Neb slid into the pilot's seat, punched the ignition, and Boss Nass's bongo engine roared to life. "Hop in," said Neb Neb as he quickly secured his safety harness.

Fassa and Spleed leaped up to the bongo and scrambled into the cockpit. Fassa had intended to take the navigator's position, but Spleed beat her to it and Fassa fell back into the roomy rear seat. A moment after Fassa activated the bongo's cockpit bubble, the sub pen was struck by a second energy torpedo, and more lake water came pounding down, hammering the hull of Boss Nass' bongo.

Neb Neb rotated the bongo so its nose pointed at the exit portal, then threw the sub forward, launching it through the gossamer sphincter and into Lake Paonga. Even though Spleed and Neb Neb knew the bongo would be fast, they were surprised when they felt their bodies press back into their seats. "Whosa tryen to paste uss-ens?" Neb Neb asked as he steered away from the lab bubble and the underwater city.

"Squidfella Quiglee got hisself a militia-bongo," Fassa replied.

"What-a weenee," Spleed commented as she scanned the sub's sensor screen, happy to have a working one for a change. A red dot was moving fast toward their position, and Spleed said, "Boomer-blip comen in speedest onda starboard."

Neb Neb steered the bongo into a steep climb, and Fassa looked out through the cockpit canopy, watching as an energy torpedo sailed under and away from them. As Neb Neb looped the sub back toward their attacker, he heard the torpedo explode on the lake floor. Outside the cockpit, the militia-bongo came into view.

Neb Neb headed straight for it.

In the Grand Gungan Army, Fassa was known for her unflappable calm under pressure. However, in all her experience, she'd never been in a bongo with Spleed Nukkels and Neb Neb Goodrow. Clutching the armrests of the rear seat, Fassa gasped, "What yousa doen?"

Neb Neb's voice was calm as he answered, "Squidfella's borer da daylights outta mesa."

The militia-bongo began angling to face the incoming sub, but its speed was no match for Boss Nass's bongo. Neb Neb rolled and sped for the militia-bongo's stern.

"Hang onto yousa thumbs," Spleed advised as she tightened her safety harness.

As per Boss Nass's instructions, the bongo's forward diving plane and skeletal structure had been heavily reinforced. Boss Nass had wanted the bongo to be extra durable as well as fast, and Spleed and Neb Neb had been happy to oblige. With a bone-jarring impact, Neb Neb slammed into the rotating dome at the base of the militia-bongo's fins. The reinforced diving plane sheared through the dome, effectively separating the militia-bongo's fins from its body. Fassa glanced back through her cockpit canopy and saw the fins whip back through the water and smash into the militia-bongo.

Fassa was speechless.

"Un dat," Neb Neb said, "isa howta rilly take out da competition." He decelerated and circled back to inspect the damage. The militia-bongo and its severed fins were floating dead in the water. Squidfella was visible inside his cockpit, unconscious and slumped over the controls.

Happy to be alive, Spleed and Neb Neb turned to face each other and said simultaneously, "Mayda bubbles always bees behind yous." Then they hawked and spat.

In the back seat, Fassa said, "Yuck."

Wiping off his face, Neb Neb said, "Mabee da good-lucky ritual a no smart idea when wesa sitten so close."

\* \* \*

Boss Nass was mortified when Lob Dizz informed him that her laboratory bubble was destroyed and his bongo was missing. But when Major Fassa returned and informed him of the details, the Boss was relieved that no one had been seriously injured. He was also delighted that his bongo had performed so admirably in the apprehension of Squidfella Quiglee.

For stealing the militia-bongo, endangering Major Fassa, and firing on Otoh Gunga, Squidfella was banned from bongo racing and sent to a remote correctional clinic. Despite all that he'd done, Neb Neb Goodrow and Spleed Nukkels bore him no grudge and hoped that proper counseling would eventually lead to his rehabilitation.

Although there was some protest from a few members of the Gungan Rep Council, Spleed and Neb Neb had their bongo licenses reinstated. Boss Nass referred to them as vital players in a sport that was drawing intergalactic attention, and he looked forward to seeing more tourists come to Otoh Gunga.

When Captain Tarpals learned of Boss Nass's plans to further promote tourism, he proposed that clearly posted warning signs -- written in Basic -- might keep the outlanders from getting into trouble. Boss Nass didn't much like the idea of warning signs all over Otoh Gunga and told Tarpals he'd think about it.

In their very next race, Spleed and Neb Neb survived yet another explosive collision. Their fans were hardly surprised, but delighted just the same.

# THE SEVEN FORMS

**T**he Great Holocron has yielded a most enlightening recording by the Jedi Knight Cin Drallig, who served as a lightsaber instructor at the Jedi Temple on Coruscant during the final years of the Old Republic. In his recording, made in 31 B.B.Y., Drallig discusses the seven forms: seven fighting disciplines that were studied by the Jedi of his era.

*Greeting, Padawans. I am Cin Drallig, your instructor in lightsaber discipline.*

*I have no doubt that you all believe you know something of the seven forms of lightsaber combat. All of you spent your first years studying Form I, and most of you have spent a year or two studying each additional form up through Form V. Some of you may be undecided about whether to now dedicate yourself to one particular form, and some of you may choose to build your own fighting style. Whether you have gained additional knowledge on lightsaber combat from databooks, seen or participated in demonstrations, or discovered and experimented with certain techniques on your own, I assure you that you have much to learn about the seven forms.*

*As you know, each form represents differing styles and philosophies, and each has its respective merits. For those of you who are unaware of the unique and subtle differences of the forms, allow me to provide brief descriptions.*

*Form I, also called Shii-Cho, requires little explanation, as every Jedi youngling learns the basics of attack, parry, body target zones, and the practice drills called velocities. Form I was created by the an-*

*cient Jedi during the transition from metal swords to energy beam lightsabers, and the principles of blade contact remain essentially the same. Because the ancient Jedi did not have lightsaber-wielding enemies, Form I does not address the lightsaber-to-lightsaber combat.*

*Form II, also called Makashi, represents the ultimate refinement of lightsaber-to-lightsaber combat. It evolved during an era when battles between Jedi and Dark Jedi had become expected, if not routine, and may have produced the greatest dueling masters the galaxy had ever seen. Masters of Form II developed unique offenses and defenses, and trained studiously against having their weapons taken or damaged.*

*Following the Battle of Ruusan, Form II became an archaism, for there were few situations in which Jedi fought lightsaber-wielding enemies. However, the former Jedi learner Aurra Sing resurfaced more than a decade ago as a bounty hunter and assassin, and has developed a reputation for taking lightsabers as trophies from her Jedi victims. Furthermore, it is now nearly a year since Obi-Wan Kenobi slew the Sith Lord who killed Qui-Gon Jinn at the Battle of Naboo, and some Jedi Masters have suggested that the Order should reexamine the requirements of Form II. Other Masters have countered that such confrontations will remain exceedingly rare so long as the Jedi remain mindful of the Force and the Sith limit their numbers to two. As long as Aurra Sing and any Sith Lords remain at large, it is the opinion of this instructor that the study of Form II should not be dismissed as impractical.*

*Form III, also called Soresu, was first developed in response to the advancement of blaster technology in the galaxy. As an ever-increasing variety of blaster weapons*



became available to military factions as well as criminals, Jedi had to revise their lightsaber skills to defend themselves. Originally, the basic principle of Form III was "laserblast" deflection training. This Form maximizes defensive protection in a style characterized by tight, efficient movements that expose minimal target areas when compared with the relatively open style of some other forms. Over many centuries, Form III has evolved into a highly refined expression of nonaggressive Jedi philosophy. True masters of Form III have long been considered invincible; although not always able to overcome their adversaries, no Form III masters have ever been defeated.

Form IV, also called Ataru, is the most acrobatic Form, filled with numerous elaborate moves, and relies heavily upon a Jedi's ability to run, jump, and spin using the Force. Form IV can be astonishing to watch. By incorporating all the Force powers that enable one to exceed standard norms of physical possibilities, Jedi may resemble nothing less than a blur when they utilize Form IV. Yes, it is true that Yoda is a Form IV master. Although it has been many years since Yoda has graced us with a demonstration, the Jedi Archives holds a collection of databooks that are testament to his mastery and prowess.

Form V, which has two distinct variations, Shien and Djem So, was developed alongside Form IV, during an era when Jedi were called upon to more actively maintain the peace in the galaxy, and when purely defensive combat skills—such as those of Form III—were deemed insufficient. Form V focuses on strength and lightsaber attack moves. Form V's Shien variation exploits the ability of the lightsaber to block a blaster bolt, and

turns this defensive move into an offensive attack by deflecting the bolt deliberately toward an opponent. Form V's Djem So variation is devoted specifically to lightsaber dueling. A dedication to the power and strength necessary to defeat an opponent characterizes the philosophy of Form V, which some Jedi describe by the maxim "Peace through superior firepower." While proponents of Form V regard it as a worthwhile discipline to prepare a Jedi for any threat, there are others who maintain that Form V fosters an inappropriate focus on dominating others.

You ask for my opinion on Form V? I am neither a proponent nor a detractor. One must question any discipline that has lethal potential. However, if it serves to suppress violent opposition and preserve peace, I believe it is a discipline worth knowing.

Form VI, also called Niman, is the current standard in lightsaber training. This form balances the emphases of other forms with overall moderation. Through Form VI, a Jedi may achieve true harmony and justice without resorting to the rule of power. It is often referred to as the diplomat's form because it is less intensive in its demands than the other disciplines, allowing Jedi to spend more time developing their skills in perception, political strategy, and negotiation. The Jedi Council maintains that Form VI best suits the role of contemporary Jedi Knights. After all, a Jedi Knight who is overly trained in martial combat might be at a loss to resolve a complex political conflict or a sensitive trade disagreement.

How long can you expect to study Form VI before you master it? If you dedicate yourself only to Form VI, you will study for at least ten years.

Is Form VI the most worthy of study? No, but in general it is the most practical.

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*I would be negligent if I refrained from noting that full masters of other forms have come to consider Form VI as insufficiently demanding.*

*Form VII, also called Juyo, is the most difficult and demanding of all forms. Only high-level masters of multiple forms can achieve and control this discipline, which can lead to fantastic power and skill. Form VII employs bold, direct movements, more open and kinetic than Form V, but not so elaborate in appearance as the acrobatic Form IV. Unlike Form V, Form VII requires greater energy because the focus is wielded more broadly, and draws upon a deeper well of emotion; while the outward bearing*

*of a Form VII practitioner is one of calm, the inner pressure verges on explosion. And unlike the graceful, linked movement sequences of Form IV, Form VII tactics overwhelm opponents with seemingly unconnected staccato sequences. This combination of traits makes Form VII highly unpredictable in battle.*

*Because so few have achieved the necessary mastery to advance to Form VII, this discipline can only be regarded as under development by a select few, and forbidden to all others. Mace Windu and his former Padawan Depa Billaba are among the only current practitioners of Form VII, and even they acknowledge that it is a dangerous regimen that may cut close to the Sith intensity of focus on physical combat ability.*

*And now let us meditate before we begin basic exercises for Form VI.*

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31 B.B.Y.

Author: Cin Drallig

*Greeting, Padawans.*

*All lightsaber combat forms involve the same marks of contact, target objectives organized as categories of damage that you can inflict on your opponents. These marks help focus your offense and defense on a few clear categories rather than diffusing awareness across an infinite number of possibilities. The names of these marks remain unaltered from the language of the earliest Jedi sages.*

*Sun djem is the ancient term for "disarming." Because relieving an opponent of his weapon or destroying it could win victory without causing injury, sun djem was especially consistent with Jedi conduct and was the primary goal of early Form I masters. However, advances in Form II made sun djem extremely difficult in lightsaber-to-lightsaber combat, as all Form II masters trained to prevent themselves from being disarmed.*

*Shiim is any kind of wound that is made with the edge of a lightsaber blade. An inconclusive mark of contact, shiim is considered inferior to other marks that decisively end a battle. Thus, its appearance expresses nothing more than a struggle with a powerful opponent. According to Jedi Archives, it was not unusual for some ancient combat veterans—Jedi and Dark Jedi alike—to forgo corrective surgery for wounds so that they might wear their lightsaber-induced scars as a badge of honor. Not surprisingly, this tradition began to die out about the same time as the discovery of bacta.*

*Shiak is "stabbing." Jedi tradition holds that shiak is an honorable method of inflicting serious injury because it causes the least visible injury to the opponent's body. Thus, shiak can express a Jedi's respect for an opponent and the living Force even as it delivers a fatal blow.*



Cho mai translates as "to cut off the weapon hand." Because this strike instantly ends an opponent's ability to use a weapon but does not kill, cho mai is always a preferred move in combat. The precision of cutting off only a hand is considered the mark of a superior lightsaber master.

Cho sun is "to dismember," but the term is used specifically in reference to removing an opponent's entire weapon arm. This move lacks the precision and elegance of cho mai, but cho sun is the move most often necessary in the heat of conflict or where no chances can be taken.

Cho mok translates as "to otherwise maim," targeting legs, limbs, or appendages that will disable your opponent. Although emergency situations may sometimes leave you with few options, I discourage cho mok unless you have an essential comprehension of your opponent's physiology. Obviously, it is crucial that you know the location of vital organs before you strike.

Sai cha comes from the ancient words for "separate" and "head," and as you might expect it describes the act of using a lightsaber to behead an opponent. Jedi commit sai cha only when battle is at its most deadly serious and threatening, or when an opponent is considered extremely dangerous even to a fully trained Jedi.

You ask for an example of such a situation? Six years ago, the Jedi Knight Qui-Gon Jinn and his then Padawan, Obi-Wan Kenobi, encountered Baroness Omnino of Vena on the planet Ord Mantell. Guilty of trafficking savrips, abducting Chancellor Valorum, and murder—among other things—Omnino wore a psychic augments, a sophisticated device that enabled her to control the minds and actions of virtually anyone she wished. Although the device did not work against Jedi, Omnino had manipulated savrips to seize Obi-Wan while she also made two Senate Guards aim their blasters at Chancellor Valorum's

head. Understand, Padawans, that with but a fleeting thought, Omnino could have urged the guards to pull the triggers of their blasters and made the savrips tear Obi-Wan to pieces. Qui-Gon knew that the only way to prevent Omnino from harming any more victims was to stop her from projecting any more thoughts, and that knocking her unconscious was not an option, because her dangerous mind might have remained active. It was under these circumstances that Qui-Gon distracted Omnino and resorted to sai cha.

Sai tok roughly translates as "to cut body in half." Jedi have long considered the bisection of a living opponent's body as a form of butchery, a desecration to be avoided if possible. Sai tok represents a potentially Sith-like desire to destroy one's enemy, whereas the Jedi goal in combat is an inner focus on defeating the danger of opponents, not striking with hate or wishing utter destruction upon them. Sai tok is generally used only against enemy droids.

Should a Jedi hesitate to use sai tok to kill a Sith Lord? An interesting question, and one you might better direct to Obi-Wan Kenobi, who used sai tok to fell the Sith on Naboo. But because he is not present, I shall take it upon myself to answer the question.

No. A Jedi should not hesitate to use any combat technique to kill a Sith Lord. Again, I stress the goal is not to wish destruction on the Sith, but to defeat the danger they pose.

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## **Anakin: Apprentice**

Anakin had left his mother and come to the Jedi Temple. Life as a Padawan learner was much better than life as a slave. However, Anakin quickly discovered that becoming a Jedi would not be easy. There were always lessons to learn and challenges to face. There was so much work, and so little time for fun!

Obi-Wan was very strict. He made Anakin work hard at everything, but he was loving and fair, too.

Anakin tried to do his best, but he sometimes failed. When he did, Obi-Wan was there to scold him and to teach him. Sometimes it seemed his Master didn't notice the good things, only his mistakes. Still, Anakin loved Obi-Wan like a father.

Anakin enjoyed building things. Back home on Tatooine he had built C-3PO, so Anakin built another droid for his new home in the Jedi Temple.

LE-4DO wasn't very smart, but he was useful. The little droid helped Anakin with his chores.

Anakin decided to build more helpers to perform the tasks he hated to do. Soon his droids were all over the place!

They swept the halls of the Jedi Temple. They tended plants in the gardens. They cleaned his room and folded his clothes.

Master Obi-Wan was uneasy about all these droids. "When I was a Padawan, I did my own chores," he said.

But Anakin didn't listen. He was proud. His droids did all the dirty work, so there was more time for him to study and become a Jedi.

**30 bby**

## **Anakin: Apprentice**

When Anakin was twelve, he built a fighting droid to help him practice. One day he brought it to a training session taught by Mace Windu.

"What's this?" Mace asked.

"A fighting droid," Anakin said proudly. "I built it to help us better our skills."

"Wait, Anakin. I don't think you should—"

Before Mace could finish, Anakin powered up the droid.

Suddenly there was a loud pop. The fighting droid's mechanical brain blew up.

"Bzzzzt . . . Swing. Block. Reverse. Strike . . . Bzzzzt!"

The droid's arms popped out. Its laser eyes opened fire!

Energy bolts shot everywhere.

The Padawans scattered!

Master Windu tackled the droid and switched it off. The droid crashed to the floor.

Mace frowned at Anakin. "Well, that *was* quite a lesson, young Padawan," he said. "But not the lesson I had in mind."

Later, Obi-Wan caught up with Anakin. "Meditating about the error of your ways?" teased Obi-Wan.

"I didn't mean to wreck the training session," Anakin cried. "I was just trying to help! To make things easier."

Obi-Wan sat down next to his apprentice. "Not everything that makes life easy is good for us. If droids did everything for us, we would soon lose our skills."

"They could just do the hard stuff," Anakin replied. "The stuff we don't want to do."

Obi-Wan shook his head. "It's doing the hard things, facing the challenges, that helps us grow."

Anakin nodded. Perhaps Obi-Wan was right.



# JEDI TRAINING

Recorded 29 A.B.Y.

Author: Obi-Wan Kenobi

*It has been three years since Anakin Skywalker became my Padawan learner. His powers continue to grow, and all of his instructors at the Jedi Temple acknowledge that his abilities exceed those not only of other students his age but of many instructors as well.*

*However, every Jedi Master has also noted that Anakin continues to exhibit behavior and emotions that are characteristic of Force-users who did not begin Jedi training at infancy. As might be expected of anyone who has been liberated from slavery, he can be outspoken regarding social injustices. I have assured him that all Jedi must develop a sense of patience, something he has difficulty maintaining. Of greater concern are his impulsiveness, competitiveness, and occasional arrogance. I admit there have been several times that I have been at a loss for words for his actions. I must remind myself of various instances when I confounded or disappointed my own Master, and that I, too, was once impatient to become a Jedi.*

*As my Padawan, Anakin has become a strong part of my life, yet he remains something of a mystery to me. Recently, I found him gazing up at the night sky. Although Coruscant's atmosphere is too polluted for stargazing, I suspected he was looking in the direction of the Tatooine system. I know that from an orbital skyhook, Tatooine's twin suns would appear to the naked eye as a dim, single star, and had found Anakin searching for that point of light on previous occasions. Feeling sympathetic, I asked him if he was thinking of his mother. He kept his eyes skyward as he answered, "No, I was thinking of yours."*

*His tone was not unkind or antagonistic, but I did sense a certain tension in his words. I asked why he was thinking of my mother, and he said, fixing me with an expression that indicated his answer was obvious, "Because someone should."*

*I didn't know what to say to that. Anakin knows that a Jedi must relinquish familial attachments, but... I suddenly found myself more concerned for his future than ever before. He misses his mother—I know this as well as anything. Although he left Tatooine willingly, he left a part of himself there. I can only offer him guidance, but if he is the Chosen One, it seems inevitable that he must free himself from that bond.*

### **Anakin: Apprentice**

*I need to find a challenge*, Anakin decided.  
*I need to try something new and difficult.*

Life at the Jedi Temple was hard, but it no longer seemed a *challenge*. Anakin's connection to the Force was too strong.

One night, while he watched the lights of Coruscant far below, Anakin wondered if he could find a new challenge down there. He decided to sneak out of the Jedi Temple and find out.

Anakin had traveled the city before, but always with Obi-Wan. He had never gone out alone, and never at night.

As he wandered the streets, Anakin saw amazing things. Strange creatures who came from all over the galaxy. Gigantic buildings glittering with light. Thousands of speeders racing across the sky.

Then Anakin saw a strange device on the back of a speeder.

"What's that?" he asked.

"Racing wings," the owner replied. "I'm going to the Wicko District. There are races at the garbage pits."

Anakin decided to go, too.

The races were amazing! The racers flew over the garbage pits of Coruscant. Giant worms lurked at the bottom, squirming in a sea of liquid silicon.

Every few minutes, garbage canisters were blasted into space. Unlucky racers got blasted into space, too.

*Wow! These wings are just as dangerous as the Podracers I used to fly. I have to try them!*

Anakin couldn't wait to face this new challenge. He got his own harness and wings, then entered a race.

He ran into trouble at the starting line. As he waited for the competition to begin, Anakin stood near a nasty alien called a Blood Carver.

The creature sneered at him. "You smell like a slave."

Suddenly the Blood Carver attacked. Anakin jumped into the pit to escape. The savage alien jumped in after him.

The Blood Carver slashed the wing of Anakin's glider. Anakin plunged to the bottom of the pit.

He looked up and saw the Blood Carver charging at him.

Suddenly Obi-Wan swooped out of the sky.

His lightsaber crackled. The Blood Carver howled. Obi-Wan had cut the wings off the creature's racing harness!

Then the Jedi dived down and grabbed Anakin.

"Obi-Wan! Thanks for the rescue," Anakin cried.

Together they blasted out of the pit. When they were safe, Obi-Wan threw the racing wings into the pit and turned to his apprentice.

"What were you thinking?" Obi-Wan said. "Don't you know those races are dangerous?"

"It's a *challenge*," Anakin replied. "You told me challenge was good."

Obi-Wan thought for a moment, then smiled.

"You're right, I did," he said. "At least you're listening. I only wish you would *understand*."

"Understand what?" Anakin said, puzzled.

Obi-Wan sighed. "That looking for excitement and adventure is not the Jedi way."



## Anakin: Apprentice

Anakin and his Master went on a dangerous journey to the frozen planet Ilum.

Anakin piloted the sleek transport himself. Obi-Wan guided him to a ledge on a gleaming ice mountain and told him to land.

"Why are we here?" Anakin asked his Master.

"We are here not on a mission, but a quest," Obi-Wan replied. "We will go to the Crystal Cave, where you will gather the crystals to complete your lightsaber."

Outside, the air was frigid. The wind blew and the ice was slippery. The climb to the cave was long and dangerous.

"Why keep the crystals here?" Anakin cried over the howl of the wind. "It's so hard to reach them."

"The crystals grow in this cave," Obi-Wan replied. "The challenge is part of the reward."

They both smiled, recalling the last time Obi-Wan had spoken to Anakin about challenge.

Near the top of the icy peak they found the Crystal Cave. But the Jedi were not alone. The entrance was guarded by a pack of fierce, hulking predators.

"Gorgodons," Obi-Wan said. "They have triple rows of teeth and sharp claws. If they catch you, they'll squeeze you to death."

The biggest gorgodon saw them and lurched forward.

"Anything else I should know?" Anakin asked.

"Gorgodons can only be stopped by a blow to the back of the neck—"

With a roar the creature charged.

"And watch out for their—"

A reptilian tail lashed out, slapping Anakin and sending him flying.

"—tails!" Obi-Wan shouted, activating his lightsaber.

The Jedi Knight slashed at the creature, but the gorgodon grabbed him and began to squeeze. Obi-Wan was helpless.

Suddenly the gorgodon howled and released him. The creature staggered and dropped at Obi-Wan's feet. Anakin had used the cable launcher to slay the creature!

The rest of the gorgodons fled. Obi-Wan led Anakin to the entrance of the Crystal Cave.

"The crystals are deep within," Obi-Wan explained. "There will be visions and voices. Some may frighten you."

"What are they?" Anakin asked.

"They are your deepest fears," Obi-Wan said. "That is what you must face."

Anakin removed his cold-weather gear. He stood in the freezing wind wearing his Jedi robes.

"I am ready," Anakin said.

Obi-Wan handed Anakin a pouch. "Here is the hilt you constructed. You will finish the lightsaber with your own hands."

Anakin heard a ghostly whisper. The sound made him shiver.

"You must go forward alone," Obi-Wan said. "Remember, there are lessons to be learned from fear and anger."

"I know," Anakin replied.

"No, you do not," Obi-Wan said. "But you will."

Inside the cave, the walls were covered with strange markings—the history of the Jedi, carved in stone.

Anakin saw an eerie glow on the floor of the cave. The crystals!

Anakin chose three crystals that seemed to speak to him.

"Before you begin you must meditate."

The voice startled Anakin. He turned and saw Obi-Wan. Wasn't Anakin supposed to be alone?

Suddenly Obi-Wan's face changed. His skin became scarlet. Horns sprouted from his bald head. His eyes turned yellow and savage. Anakin saw blackness and evil.

*It was the Sith that had killed Qui-Gon!*

The monster laughed, then tossed something to Anakin. He snatched it out of the air.

It was Anakin's lightsaber. It was complete! The hilt was perfectly crafted and beautifully balanced.

Anakin activated the blade and attacked Qui-Gon's murderer.

"I am the Master you secretly want," the evil one hissed as he dodged Anakin's blow.

"No!" Anakin screamed. "You're a vision. I can make you go away."

"I am the dark side, and I am part of you," the Sith replied. Then the creature activated a double-bladed lightsaber. He smiled, his razor-sharp teeth gleaming in the darkness.

Anakin charged. The fiend snarled and knocked him aside.

Anakin was dashed against the wall of the cave. He slumped to the floor. Dazed, he heard the Sith laugh.

"I will return," he said. "For I dwell inside you."

When Anakin opened his eyes again, the lightsaber was by his side.

*I must have completed it in the trance,* he told himself.

When Anakin emerged from the Crystal Cave, Obi-Wan was waiting for him.

"Look what you have done," Obi-Wan said proudly. "This lightsaber is magnificent. The Force is truly with you."

Anakin didn't tell Obi-Wan about his troubling vision. He was happy to have his own lightsaber. He finally felt like a Jedi, so he focused on that.

Still, he remained troubled by the creature's words.

*Can such evil really live inside me?*  
Anakin wondered.



*Before I submit my report of my activities over the past year, I have reason to make a statement about Obi-Wan Kenobi and his Padawan, Anakin Skywalker.*

*As you know, because only members of the Jedi Council were aware of my assignment, Obi-Wan and Anakin were under the impression that I had betrayed our Order, and did not know of my mission to infiltrate the criminal syndicate operated by the pirate Krayn. It has come to my attention that some members of the Council have expressed dismay over the fact that Anakin unintentionally revealed me as a Jedi operative to Krayn, and that the Council has also pondered whether Anakin acted honorably when he killed Krayn.*

*Furthermore, I am aware that the Galactic Senate, in response to Republic media reports regarding Anakin's actions at Nar Shaddaa, is considering the formation of an independent committee to investigate the legal and ethical ramifications of allowing Padawans to participate in "dangerous missions." I know it is not my place to criticize the Senate, but I will allow that I would sooner have any Padawan at my side in battle than I would any Senator.*

*Although it was through Anakin's actions that my identity was revealed to Krayn, it would be a grave injustice if any review board held Anakin accountable. Obi-Wan and Anakin had no way of knowing that our paths would cross, and had every reason to believe I had abandoned the Jedi Order. With all due respect, I remind the Council that Obi-Wan and Anakin did not happen upon me by accident. After all, it was the Council that sanctioned their mission to escort the Colicoids across treacherous territories.*

*Did Anakin act with impatience during his first mission as a Jedi? Yes. But those of you who know me well will recall that I was never good at patience exercises at the Temple, either. After Anakin realized I had not betrayed the Order, he proved to be most resourceful. More than anyone, he is responsible for liberating the slaves on Nar Shaddaa.*

*Was Anakin motivated by revenge to kill Krayn? Only Anakin can answer that question truthfully. But as a witness to their duel, and also as a Jedi, I can attest to the fact that had I been in Anakin's position, Krayn would have died by my lightsaber. In that capacity, I believe that Krayn's death was decided not by Anakin, but by the will of the Force.*

## **Master Tholme recording**

*Recently, Quinlan Vos has overcome the loss of his memory and been restored to the Jedi Order. He has also saved Coruscant from the Witches of Dathomir, recovered his Padawan Aayla Secura from abductors, and defeated the Dark Jedi Volfe Karkko. Though I believe that these accomplishments more than sufficiently qualify Quinlan to be granted the position of Jedi Master, I am aware that some members of the Council have always had misgivings about my training Quinlan, not only because he was already a toddler when I first detected his high midi-chlorian level, but also because—at the request of his clan—the initial training was conducted on Kiffu, not Coruscant. For anyone who ever questioned my reasons for taking him as my Padawan, I urge you to consider certain details of his history.*

*You will recall that Quinlan's parents were Guardians, and also direct relations of Sheyf Kurlin Vos and his sister Tinte Vos. Several years into his training, Quinlan's parents were found dead within their starship on the surface of Kiffex, the world that contains the prison colonies overseen by the Guardians. There were no marks on their bodies, and no cause of death could be determined. Unfortunately, I was occupied with another assignment, and was unable to return to Kiffu until three days later. Shortly afterward, I lay down my Watchman duties and took Quinlan as my Padawan.*

*I confess there is more to the story, but the details are not on any of the official records because, for Quinlan's sake, I omitted them. Before my return to Kiffu, Tinte Vos—*

*without the consent of her brother—had forced Quinlan to hold an emblem that his mother had been wearing when she died. Tinte Vos told him it was the only way to find out what killed his parents. What she didn't tell him is that death experiences are very vivid, and that touching such objects can be hazardous to psychometrics.*

*By holding his mother's emblem, Quinlan learned that his parents had intercepted a ship of Anzati who were trying to land on Kiffex. His parents attempted to arrest the Anzati, but despite their Guardian training they were unable to overcome an attack from the thirsty beings. The shock of seeing the Anzati feast on his parents' essence was beyond overwhelming.*

*By the time I found Quinlan, he'd been screaming for three days. It wasn't until I used Jedi healing techniques that I knew that we could draw his mind back from his mother's grave. The boy was shattered, and Sheyf Kurlin was appalled by what his sister had done. When I told the Sheyf that only Jedi training would enable the boy to face and master his newly and deeply instilled fear of the Anzati, he readily agreed to allow me to bring Quinlan to Coruscant.*

*Quinlan was my first Padawan. Though I was sometimes at a loss to advise him on the best use of his psychometric talents, I did teach him to be a Jedi. I taught him to carry the light within him. If one senses a darkness about Quinlan, remember his experience as a child, but trust that I also trained him how to walk in shadows.*

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27 bby

### Memo From Kamino

*Internal memo penned by Hali Ke, senior research geneticist, Kamino, 27 BBY:*

It is truly a pleasure to be producing humans again – and this time with a budget that allows us to linger in the twists and turns of that fascinating genome. Of all the species I have examined and augmented, humans may be my favorite. Humans offer us the greatest possibility of success side-by-side with the ever-present prospect of failure – and the difference may be the smallest snip of genetic code. This is the true art of genetic selection and manipulation. A human is naturally a learning creature, but is also violent, selfish, lustful, and undisciplined. So we must walk the knife edge between suppressing the factors that lead to disobedience and destroying the capacity for applying intelligence and aggression.

Humans are simultaneously capable of extraordinary viciousness and extraordinary acts of kindness and altruism. In attempting to understand the mental processes and constructs that have sprung from their tangled genetic code, I have interviewed and psychoanalyzed humans from both ends of this broad spectrum. I've spoken — at a safe remove — with a pirate from the Fair Hollis system who lacked the ability to see other organic beings as anything other than objects, and with Kardavan penitents who had spent their entire lives attempting to ameliorate the suffering of beings with whom they shared no bond of kinship or community. Any attempt to summarize the habits, attitudes and psyches of humans would either be so lengthy as to defy useful summary, or so general as to be useless.

That said, there *are* qualities essential to humans — ones that emerged so far back in their history that are foundational aspects of the species. Above all else, humans are *adaptable* — adaptable in terms of physiology, mentality and society. Their genome is remarkably elastic: Selection pressures need a few millennia at most to engage new genes and reshape their bodies in response to environmental changes, as the galaxy's countless near-human populations attest. Human societies, meanwhile, are so divergent that two human populations can have more in common with neighbors of other species than they do with each other. I am aware of many theories for why humans dominate the galaxy, but in my view the answer is simple. Humans succeed because their

societies and even their bodies morph quickly in response to a dizzying range of conditions.

I have now logged many sessions with our prime clone Jango Fett, and concluded that he embodies his species' contradictions. He is a killer many times over, ending the life of others without hesitation if paid to do so, yet his anger was obvious when I suggested he lacked morality. He is one of the most able, competent humans I have ever observed, remaining calm in situations that would leave most organics helpless with terror. Yet he witnessed horrors in his childhood that he will not discuss, and around which his mind has constructed apparently impenetrable barriers.

Jango is given to solitude and affects a disdain for human relationships and connections, yet when he agreed to help train our army, he immediately summoned a band of mercenaries who shared his background. And, of course, there is the matter of his fee: Jango seemed barely to care for the considerable sum of five million credits, but was adamant that we create an unaltered clone of himself, whom he now refers to — without a trace of self-consciousness — as his son. I have seen him return to Kamino after killing men for credits, wash the blood out of his starship's hold, and an hour later be gently talking and playing with young Boba.

The clones we are training will not, of course, be Jango Fett — we have augmented their genomes to make them superior soldiers, with greater lung capacity, more fast-twitch musculature, improved stamina and better recovery times. We have eliminated physical defects such as susceptibilities to environment allergies and a mild astigmatism. Our clones will be more docile than Jango, less given to anger and more inclined to group identity. They will, unavoidably, lack some of Jango's tactical brilliance and improvisational genius — but this should be offset by a greater ability to operate effectively as a combat unit.

But for all that, we must expect a certain number of aberrant behavioral events in units approved for deployment to the customer. Some of Jango's independence and defiance will surface, as it is buried too deeply in the genome to extract without eliminating the qualities we value. And some of our units will display other quirks, as Factor H asserts itself. Jango insists these displays of individuality and unpredictability will make our units *more* effective, not less, and I agree. Factor H may be frustrating to those who track aberrance rates, but I predict our combat trainers will find a strong correlation between deviations from behavioral patterning and effectiveness on the battlefield.

I should also like to address a final point of contention, one I thought had been put to rest during our reviews of the initial Fett prototypes. This, of course, is the question of why these clone units were not engineered to be sterile as per standard procedure.

The answer goes to the heart of why Factor H cannot and should not be eliminated. Two recent human projects – the miners created for Tarshan Ring Excavations and the infiltration squads requested by the Lords of Purala IV – began with trials of sterile clones, as requested by both customers. In both cases the clone prototypes displayed much higher rates of mental instability, poor unit cohesion, an inability to adapt and think creatively, and decreased aggressiveness in battlefield sims. A number of corrective measures were employed — synthetic hormones, rewiring cortical pleasure centers and dietary additives — but all cases improvement was minimal.

It is certainly irregular to recommend that we deliver an army of clone units able to reproduce. But the TRE and Puralan experiments, as well as my experience with humans, tell me that we have no choice if we also want an army that can fight effectively. I propose that we mitigate the situation through the following measures:

- channel the clone units' normal human impulses for pair-bonding and reproduction into unit cohesion and mission preparation;
- advise the customer to minimize contact with civilians and mainstream human society in crafting the clone units' daily routines;
- limit knowledge of the clone units' reproductive capacity to military officials on a strictly need-to-know basis; and
- pursue bioengineered contingency planning in the event that a mass emergency reconditioning is required. (Bioengineering could also be useful if further behavioral modification is requested.) This latter option must be pursued with the utmost secrecy due to its possible exploitation by the customer's enemies.

By following this program, I am confident that incidents of clones reproducing will remain minimal, and their impact further minimized through contrafactual public communications by the customer. And in the meantime, we on Kamino will of course continue to try to unlock this puzzle – and the others that come with our work on such a fascinating, confounding species.

### Cad Bane: Reputation

It wasn't even genuine rain pattering down around him, muting the hum of the speeders and skiffs high above. Real rain could never have wormed its way among the various obstacles to reach the city's lower levels. No, this was condensation, dripping from the undersides of bridges, roadways, and TaggeCo grav-cranes overhead. Oily, polluted, stinking and stinging, it was enough to drive almost anyone to seek the nearest shelter.

Almost anyone. Not the hunter.

Broad-brimmed hat and sturdy coat of nashtah hide shed the putrid water as efficiently as any forcefield, but even if they hadn't, the figure crouched beneath them would likely never have noticed the precipitation. From a flat and leathery face beneath that brim, the sinister crimson eyes of a Duros peered not at the multitude of towers above and ledges below, or the glimmering of a thousand lights, but into the years ahead.

War's coming.

Most people didn't like to think about it, didn't want to admit it. They pretended the Trade Federation's recent embargoes were flukes; ignored the growing whispers of separation and secession from the Outer Rim systems; placed an almost religious faith in the new chancellor's abilities to reunite a fractious Senate.

He knew better, the hunter did. He could smell it in the air, across the length and breadth of the Republic. Might be a few years, yet, but war it would be.

And there was money to be made in war. A lot of money; more wealth than even the greediest Corellian could imagine. But he needed the name, the reputation, to claim it, which was why he'd taken this fool's errand of a job in the first-

His eyes snapped back into focus with a single blink at the sudden vibration in the metallic band on his left wrist. Something had tripped the portable sensor field-independent from the building's internal security, and not nearly as easily bypassed-the Duros had placed on the roof below. Indeed, even as he rose for a

better view, a glimmer of green luminescence shone, briefly but brightly, from a darkened hatch.

"Suppose it's about that time, then..." the hunter muttered, his voice a rasping, rolling growl. Spindly fingers ran across the custom blasters at his waist in a final check, and then he was off and running. Coat flowing behind him like wings, boots spraying a wake of filthy water, the bounty hunter hit the edge of the platform and leapt.

\* \* \*

"Blast doors down! Blast doors down!"

Akris Ur'etu, lord of the youthful but rich and brutal Skar'kla Consortium, cringed at the sound of his own voice, shrill enough to drown out the slamming of the heavy slabs. He knew it made him sound panicked, even cowardly, and couldn't do a bleeding thing about it. When the Bothan crime boss grew agitated, his shadow-gray fur stood on end and his voice screeched like the felines he so greatly resembled.

Still, whatever his people thought of his bravery-or lack thereof-they obeyed. Half a dozen guards, human and otherwise, crouched throughout the room or flattened themselves against the walls, blasters and slug-throwers trained on the nigh-impregnable door. Ur'etu himself clutched a holdout blaster in one paw, hidden behind his magnificent desk of blood-red greel wood.

"Is it him?" he demanded, his tone now slightly more under control. He ran his empty paw over his head, as though he could force his fur to relax. "Are we certain it's him?"

A bronze-scaled Trandoshan thug opened his maw to speak, but the answer quickly became moot. A pinprick of glowing heat blossomed through the blast door; molten durasteel trickled from the breach, disturbingly like seepage from a ruptured cyst.

Swiftly, smoothly, that point became a line, tracing its way down the surface of the door. Ur'etu could practically envision the brown robed figure on the other side, lightsaber pressed tight to the portal.

"As he likes it, then," the Bothan sneered, his worry drowning in a growing tide of anger. "I don't know why this Jedi's been interfering with my operations-or what happened to the bounty hunter who's supposed to get him out of my fur!-but it ends here! The instant that door opens, I want that hallway filled with enough blaster fire to charbroil a Hutt!"

Guards grunted, fingers flexed on triggers and firing studs-and slowly, methodically, the sizzling outline in the blast door grew...

When the cut was finally complete, a chunk of durasteel simply slid away and toppled into the chamber. Clearly, the Jedi had canted the cut downward so gravity alone would do the job of moving the heavy slab; had any of Ur'etu's men been fool enough to stand too close, they'd have been pulped.

Blasters screamed and bolts flew even as the room shuddered at the impact, so many and so rapidly that the ambient air grew charged, but no target stood revealed for them to hit. After a few volleys that served no purpose other than to score the walls beyond, it finally dawned on the lot of them that they were firing into an empty corridor.

Empty... until, just as the Trandoshan began to edge forward, a tiny metallic sphere bounced into the room from off to the left of the gaping hole in the door.

"Detonator!"

Ur'etu dropped beneath his heavy desk with a horrified yowl; guards dove for cover or turned to run, as though there were any real way to escape.

The blast, when it came, was almost pure heat and flame without concussion. The Trandoshan and two other thugs were incinerated outright, the others singed to various degrees of pain. Smoke, far more than any traditional thermal detonator should have emitted, billowed upward to cloud not only the doorway but that entire half of the room.

"Eyes on the door!" the Bothan shrieked from beneath the desk. "He'll be-!"

He already was. From the very top of the smoke, carried through the fumes in a leap that no normal human could have duplicated, the dark-clad intruder rolled. A sizzling snap-hiss! and an emerald reflection in the cloud heralded his arrival. The lightsaber flashed, and the first of the surviving guards went down.

From well behind the Jedi-who, it turned out, was a blackhaired and bearded human of average height, clad in a dark-hued variant of the Order's traditional garb-the bounty hunter watched through narrowed crimson slits. One finger idly tapped at his chin, while the other kept the same rhythm on the butt of a holstered blaster.

These were no Jedi tactics he'd ever heard of! Slicing through the blast door, that was one thing, but the Duros had never seen a lightsaber like this one. The shaft alone was over a meter long, as though the weapon had been stuck on the end of a small pike, turning it into more of a spear than a sword. And he'd watched as the Jedi ducked aside, hunkering behind the segment of the door still standing until the inevitable barrage had passed, and then...

"Since when," he asked himself softly, "does the Jedi satchel of tricks include thermal detonators?"

Most curious of all, though, was the leap that carried the intruder into the chamber beyond the wall of smoke. For just a split second, as the Jedi crouched, the bounty hunter swore he spotted tiny flashes of light from the soles of the man's boots.

"Well, now. What exactly are we looking at here?"

Tugging the collar of his coat high and tight to filter the worst of the fumes (Breathing tubes! Best add breathing tubes to my own sack of tricks...), the bounty hunter crept toward the smoke.

\* \* \*

When the boss of the Skar'kla Consortium had ducked beneath his desk, it wasn't only because he'd hoped the heavy greel wood might shield him from the blast. A hidden switch, a quick turn, and the floor beside the desk hissed open. By the time the last of the guards fell to the lightsaber, Ur'etu was already dashing along a metal-paneled corridor, swearing up a storm in Bothese between ragged gasps. He'd expected he might have to retreat, that the guards upstairs might not be enough-but he thought they'd at least have slowed the blasted Jedi down a little! With every step, he had to quash the urge to look over his shoulder, convinced he heard pounding footsteps or the sinister hum of the blade close

behind him. A dozen times he started at sudden movement, and a dozen times it proved nothing more than his own reflection in the polished walls.

Finally, after what felt like a sprint of roughly a light year or so, he came to the end of the corridor, and a heavy door not substantially thinner than the blast doors above. Somewhat frantically-for now he really did hear the rapid steps of the oncoming Jedi-he waved a paw over a sensor recessed into the durasteel. Instantly the portal slid up into the frame, revealing Ur'etu's security center.

From amidst a ring of standing monitors, the Bothan's Weequay security chief peered at him.

"Problem, boss?"

The clunk of the closing door masked another stream of Bothese obscenities. "What the mradhe muck kind of stupid question is that?!"

The Weequay shrugged, and if he felt at all contrite, it didn't show in the crags and wrinkles of his coarse face. "Thought you said you'd call me when you needed-"

"Wasn't time! That Jedi tore your men apart!"

"My-?"

"He's coming through that door any second," Ur'etu continued between wheezes.

"Good!" The security chief stepped away from his post, a stubby force pike clutched in his left fist. It began to crackle and spit, as though just as anxious as its wielder for the coming chaos. "Been wantin' to try my hand against a Jedi."

"You don't have to beat the son of a mynock! Just lock him up long enough for..." The Bothan hefted his blaster.

"Just don' hit me, boss."

"Oh, thank you so much for the-"



No lightsaber cuts this time; the door simply slid upward once more to reveal the cloaked and cowed figure beyond.

Instantly Ur'etu stepped back and to one side, raising the small but deadly weapon in hopes of a clean shot. The Weequay strode forward, force pike spinning idly at his side.

The Jedi's left hand rose, fingers pointing at the Bothan.

Ur'etu gasped as the blaster abruptly tore itself from his grip and sailed across the chamber to slap into a dark-gloved palm.

The Weequay had crossed roughly half the distance between them in a sudden lunge before the Jedi flipped the blaster around and shot him in the face.

"Now... now wait a minute..." the Bothan protested, backing away with both paws raised. "Look, I don't know what grudge you have against my organization, but I'm sure there's some arrangement that we can glrk..."

The Jedi stepped to one side, left hand pointing once more, and Ur'etu began to choke.

\* \* \*

"Right. Think I've seen about enough, then."

Two faces, one hooded and one furred, twitched around as the bounty hunter stepped calmly into the security chamber. Ur'etu made a peculiar gurgling in his throat, gesturing madly toward the Jedi with one paw while the other continued to grab futilely at his own neck.

The Duros watched the Jedi's arm shift beneath his robes, saw the indecision on the man's face, and offered a broad, sharp-toothed grin. "Don't mind me. I got no intention of interfering. By all means, finish up."

One wouldn't have thought the suffocating Bothan's eyes could bulge any wider. One would have been wrong. Ur'etu, boss of the Skar'kla Consortium, died staring in horrified rage at the blue-skinned bounty hunter.

"Now," the bounty hunter began as the body slumped to the floor, "let's you and me talk a minute."

"What about?" Even had the Jedi's words not swum in a soup of suspicion, the hand he rested on the hilt of his lightsaber would have been indicator enough.

"Mostly about how you faked all..." Long blue fingers waved idly at the room in general. "All this."

The hand on the lightsaber shaft tightened.

"I don't recommend it, son. Not even a Jedi'd be fast enough-and we both know you're no Jedi."

The man's answering hiss of astonished anger led into the louder hiss of plasma, the lightsaber blade once more snapping on to bathe him in a faint green glow...

And just as swiftly shut down as a blaster bolt tore through the shaft, sending metal shrapnel, burnt wiring, and crystalline shards tearing through cloth and, in a few painful instances, skin.

"Stolen lightsaber, right?" the bounty hunter continued, as casually as if discussing the latest slingball match. "Extra haft makes it easier to wield without leaving a few of your own limbs behind, that one's obvious. What else you got?"

The "Jedi" leapt, clearing the control panels and half the chamber in a bound, heading toward the fallen Weequay and-presumably-his weapons.

"The boots, right. Impressive." A second blaster bolt flew, piercing miniature engine, leather, and flesh alike. Smoke, so thick it was almost a fluid, gushed from the human's right heel. Propelled only by the other, now, his leap veered off course, slamming him into the wall with a bone-bruising crunch. He slid to the floor, groaning. "Smallest personal jet I've seen was 30-kilo pack," the Duros told him, gesturing idly with the pistol. "You're lucky I made that shot, by the way. I don't typically practice shooting to wound."

Fingers shaking, the supposed Jedi raised a hand once more. The blaster quivered in the hunter's hand, then began to pull away.

"Mono-filament cable with a magnetic grapple?" The bounty hunter yanked, and the wounded man slid across the floor, dragged by his own wrist. "Probably looked just like the Force to that scared Bothan idiot when you snagged his blaster." The human fetched up against the hunter's feet with a pained gasp.

"And the suffocation. Let me see..." He bent low, studying the other's wrist gauntlets. "Gas emitter. Wouldn't recommend trying that, not with you and me so close. Might choke the both of us, hmm?"

"Real clever scheme, I'll give you that." The Duros holstered his weapon, then again started to idly tap a finger against his chin. "Leave behind a few bodies killed with a lightsaber or choked without any bruising, make sure witnesses see you performing a few tricks, and everyone's thinking your target riled up the Jedi something fierce. So nobody-not the authorities, not Ur'etu's allies-are looking at any of his business rivals. Smart.

"So which Hutt are you working for?"

"What did-? I never said... How-?"

"Not hard to figure. Not like anyone but the Hutts have been trying to move on Skar'kla territory."

The "Jedi" nodded once, his teeth clenched.

"All right. Then here's the deal, son. I took Ur'etu's job-that's killing you, in case you still weren't sure-because I figured taking down a Jedi would garner some attention. But everyone would've figured it out, once I brought you in. So here's what I figure: The Hutt's bounty on the Bothan must be pretty sizable, so I'm going to collect it.

"And you... You're gonna convince me I made the right call letting you live by teaching me how to construct this kind of miniaturized equipment." Already the hunter's mind was reeling with the possibilities; energy fields, ship controls, hidden weapons, code breakers...

The false Jedi was clearly wise enough not to bother asking what would happen should he refuse. Instead, he nodded a second time, even more stiffly. "I didn't catch your name, bounty hunter."

"Bane. The name's Cad Bane."

"Never heard of you."

"No." Bane couldn't keep a broad and vicious smile from spreading across his face. War was looming-and the hunter with access to this kind of gear, and the right attitude to use it, would have more than enough of a reputation to cash in when the time came. "No, you wouldn't have."

"Not yet."





## **Anakin: Apprentice**

Once again, Anakin searched for challenge and excitement. He became fascinated by Coruscant's underworld. At night he prowled the twisting avenues of the lower levels.

One night Anakin saw a crowd of teenagers gathering around the entrance to a cargo tunnel.

"What's going on?" he asked.

"The leader of the Sligo Pirate gang is going to race the Twi'lek!" a teenager with purple hair said excitedly.

*A race!* Anakin rushed to the front of the crowd.

Two swoop bikes hovered near the tunnel's mouth, engines roaring. A rough-looking Gotal gave the signal, and the racers were off.

They roared into the tunnel and out of sight.

"What happens now?" Anakin asked.

"The winner will come out of the tunnel in a few minutes," the purple-haired girl replied.

"And the loser?"

The girl shrugged.

The Sligo Pirates' leader limped out of the tunnel a moment later. There was no sign of his swoop bike.

The rest of the Sligo Pirates climbed aboard their swoop bikes. They flew away, leaving their former chief in the dust.

"Looks like they'll have to choose a new leader," said Purple Hair.

As dawn broke, Anakin walked back to the Jedi Temple. He was burning with excitement.

Oollie, the girl with the purple hair, had explained how the races worked. The contestants came from all over Coruscant. They raced through the cargo tunnels at night, when hover-train traffic was light. The competitions were very dangerous. Bikers had to dodge cargo caravans and droid maintenance teams. Sometimes they crashed.

It didn't take long for Anakin to get his own swoop bike. He loved his sleek red racer. Anakin worked on it until it was the fastest swoop around.

Almost every night he flew down to the industrial sector to race. Anakin won more than he lost.

Soon everyone who dwelled in the underworld had heard of the Jedi who raced swoop bikes. Gangs came from all over the planet to watch Anakin.

Sometimes they challenged the young Jedi to a race.

"Someone's looking for you," Oollie told Anakin one night.

"Oh," Anakin replied, climbing off his swoop. "Who would that be?"

"Drako, the leader of the Hawk-bat gang."

Anakin was impressed. Drako was a four-armed Codru-Ji and one of the fastest racers on the planet. Drako never lost. Some said it was because he always cheated.

"Here he comes now!" Oollie said.

With a rumble that shook the buildings around them, the Hawk-bat gang raced into the square. The leader roared to a stop in front of Anakin.

"Are you the Jedi?" the gang leader asked.

"That's me."

"I challenge you to a race through the tunnel near the power plant. Meet me in one hour."

Anakin smiled. "You're on."

Drako grinned evilly. "Don't be late, Jedi."

As the gang sped away, Anakin felt a tingle. The Force was warning him of danger. Anakin stubbornly ignored his feelings.

*If it wasn't dangerous, then it wouldn't be a challenge,* he told himself.

Anakin arrived at the cargo tunnel at the appointed time. News of the race had spread quickly. There was a large crowd waiting near the power plant for the race to begin.

The Gotal who usually refereed these events was nowhere to be seen. One of the Hawk-bat gang members stood at the entrance, waving a starting flag.

Once again, Anakin sensed danger, but it was too late to back out now.

Anakin guided his swoop bike to the starting line and stopped beside Drako. The gang leader gunned his engine. His swoop bike rumbled with power.

The referee waved his flag.

"Ready . . . steady . . . BURN IT!"

The swoops took off in a cloud of dust.

Anakin was already in the lead as they sped into the cargo tunnel.

Drako was right behind him.

Inside the tunnel, Drako pulled even with Anakin. Side by side they raced, around corners and past catwalks crowded with droid maintenance teams.

Then Anakin saw Drako holding something—an ion blaster!

Drako aimed at Anakin's bike and fired. A burst of blue lightning rippled around Anakin's swoop. The engine coughed as Anakin fought for control.

Suddenly Drako swerved, darting into a narrow side tunnel and vanishing from sight.

At that moment a giant cargo carrier roared around the corner. The droid-controlled hauler filled the tunnel. There was no getting around it!

The ion bolt had damaged Anakin's engine and steering mechanism. His swoop was out of control.

Anakin leaped clear just before the cargo carrier slammed into his bike. He somersaulted in the air and landed on a catwalk.

Anakin was battered and bruised from the fall, but his Jedi training had saved his life.

**A Traveler's Journals of Ralltiir**

Part 1: World of Watchers

As told to Morrie Mullins by Vareesa Enan

I am SO excited! Just last week, I was sitting in the back of my cousin's dingy little sop house in Cularin, and now look at me - - a young Ithorian off to see the galaxy! I knew cousin Vanster had a fondness for me, even if he always seemed a little annoyed when I showed up at the cantina, since he always found a way to send me to just the right person to answer every question I had. But when he said, "Vareesa, you must travel more and find answers for yourself," I hardly knew what to do. Then he bought me a ticket, and now, here I am, getting ready to make my descent onto the first world that I found on the charts that sounded like fun.

I can see Ralltiir out my viewport. It's a small viewport, I guess, but it's not like I'm traveling first class or anything. It's enough that I can see the planet, and that's exciting.

I've been trying to think of what kind of theme I should have, when I go from one planet to another. Cousin Vanster said I should do something with the native plant life, but some of the planets really don't have much. Besides, every traveling Ithorian that I've ever met wants to document plant life. I want to do something different.

I'm thinking architecture.

I'm not sure if Ralltiir was the place to start, for that. I've seen pictures of places like Coruscant, where you can see cities from space, and Ralltiir just isn't the same.

I've done some studying on the architecture of Ralltiir. There's not a lot to do in hyperspace except read and talk to people, and most of the people on this shuttle aren't very talkative. Lots of those Falleen folks, including this really arrogant man that everyone seems to avoid. I say, if people want to be left alone, leave them alone.

Anyway, Ralltiir's architecture is pretty varied in style. You've got

some really old buildings, with lots of arches and columns and bridges, and some of them are even made out of stone. Then there are some newer buildings, where you're seeing lots more angular, geometric designs, like what Dieterschach does with some of the big corporate plazas, or that horrible set of designs some of the Hutts used for ships a few years back. You remember, the ones that looked like a child had glued some blocks together and dropped them into orbit?

The neat thing about the old and the new buildings on Ralltiir is that they aren't, as near as I can tell, segregated based on economic conditions. On some planets, you get all the old classical-style buildings in the more run-down sections of the world, and the more modern-looking buildings in the newer sections where there's more traffic. That's not the case on Ralltiir. I looked up the "good" and "bad" parts of Cambriele (that's the capitol), and there are old and new buildings everywhere.

Well, they're telling us that we need to get strapped in, so I'm going to do some more recording on this later. This is Vareesa Enan, signing off!

## Part 2: The Wayward Ithorian

As told to Morrie Mullins by Vareesa Enan

So, we landed a little while ago at the Grallia spaceport. It's enormous! I mean, I know that I probably sound like some little backwater fool, but I always forget how big things are away from home, and how strange people can seem.

I was a little worried, to start with. It's one thing to think about traveling, and it's even okay to be on the ship and getting close to your goal, but it's another thing entirely to step off the ship and find yourself in the middle of a few thousand people you've never known. I seem to have the grace that runs in my family, too; I think I stepped on at least five sets of feet before I made it out of the main terminal!

Fortunately, I met a really nice Ithorian who was waiting for a hovercab outside the terminal. It was so good to see another Ithorian! He is a little bit pale - - he says it's the atmosphere, we don't get a whole lot of light here and he says staying too long will make any of our kind a little on the



pale side - - and kind of scrawny, but he's very nice. His name is Kikow, and he was just getting back from visiting Albucus on business. (He says there really isn't much to see there, and I should avoid it.) But the best part is, he knows all of Ralitiir really well, and he's going to be my tour guide for the next couple of days!

## A Traveler's Journals of Ralitiir

### Part 3: Exhibition

As told to Morrie Mullins by Vareesa Enan

Kikow took me to the most amazing museum that I've ever seen today. It's called the Cambriele Exploration Auditorium, and it's all about the exploration of the galaxy. Right now, they have an amazing exhibition called "Children of the Galaxy," and that's where we spent most of our time.

I think Kikow was a little disappointed that there weren't more Ithorian children in the exhibition, but I told him that most of us stay at home while we're young, and we don't go out exploring. I told him that most of the children featured in the exhibition probably ran away from home and weren't very good children anyway, so it shouldn't surprise us that there weren't any Ithorians among them. He got a little grumpy then and wandered off to make some comlink calls. I don't think he understands children very well, but he's a nice person all the same.

The exhibit was wonderful, though! There were children of dozens of different species who had all done exploration or helped to discover important things. Some of them did it on purpose, but some of it was accidental. There was this one Rodian girl who liked to play with hyperspace charts when she was young, and she was looking at them and figured out that something wasn't quite right. The best time you could make going from one planet to another (I can't remember which two) was too long, which meant that the route wasn't straight. She discovered a whole new star system that had just started forming, just like that!

I had to look around to find Kikow. He was talking to a Wookiee in one of the botanical areas. They were standing under a holo of a really nice, healthy-looking tree. The Wookiee didn't look happy, but then, a lot of

Wookiees don't look happy. I think this one was mad because someone played a practical joke on it and shaved the fur off its shoulders. At least, I think that's what happened. I can't actually understand Wookiees when they talk.

When he saw me coming, Kikow waved, and the Wookiee kind of growled, then it pulled the cutest little droid out of its bag and let it hover so the droid could translate for me to be able to understand her. Her name was Furellas, and she had pretty, light-brown fur. I told her so, and she smiled, and I guess all Wookiee smiles are kind of scary. Hers was, at least. But at least she had pretty fur.

## A Traveler's Journals of Ralhtiir

### Part 4: The Ithorian and the Tiger

As told to Morrie Mullins by Vareesa Enan

I have a new pet! He's the most wonderful thing in the world. Furellas and Kikow escorted me to the open-air market today, and while we were walking through the stalls, I saw the cutest basket of kittens! They're all soft fur and big yawns, and they don't even have teeth or claws yet.

Furellas insisted on buying me one of the kittens - - she said it will grow up to be big and strong, and will protect me. She called it a "Ralhtiir tiger," but it doesn't look like other tigers I've seen pictures of. She even suggested a name for him, and I really liked it, so now I have a tiger named Little Kikow. Isn't that cute? Kikow said he really didn't want Little Kikow to be named after him, but by then it was already too late.

Little Kikow likes to cuddle and sleep, and he's the softest thing I've ever held. I think Kikow is a little jealous, but I'm sure he'll get over it. That was a really great trip to the market.

### Part 5: The Kalmec

As told to Morrie Mullins by Vareesa Enan

Well, my time on Ralhtiir is almost done, and unfortunately, Kikow had business to attend to elsewhere. Fortunately, his friend Furellas was able to

help me get everything packed up, and she even got me all the paperwork I need to take Little Kikow with me on the ship. She told me I have to be careful not to tell people too much about him, because Ralltiir tigers are very rare and lots of people would want to take him away from me and cut off his fur to sell to the Hutts, so we registered him as a different kind of cat - - she filled out the paperwork and gave it to some of her Wookiee friends to handle.

She's really nice - - not as scary as I thought. She has a bunch of friends who have their shoulders shaved, too. I asked her why they did that, and she gave me a long explanation that basically said, because if we don't, people treat us like animals.

It's kind of interesting to hear her talk about it. Wookiees really do have a lot more fur than most sentients, and because they can't talk in Basic, they get treated like they're less important than other sentients in the galaxy. They aren't less important, though. She and her friends - - they call themselves the Kalmec - - shave their shoulders to remind people that underneath their fur, Wookiees are just like everyone else. You know, when she smiles now, it isn't nearly as scary.